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No. 603.

Published Every
Wednesday.

Beadle & Adams, Publishers,
98 WILLIAM STREET, N. Y., May 14, 1890.

Ten Cents a Copy.
\$5.00 a Year.

Vol. XLVII.



DRACO WAS STRETCHED BY HIS SIDE, HER MUZZLE RESTING ON HIS SHOULDER, HER EYES GLEAMING AS SHE WATCHED THE GROUP ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE CAMP-FIRE.

OR,
**The Strange Pilgrimage
of Gentle Jack.**

The Romance of Estacado Desert Kingdom.

BY WM. R. EYSTER,
AUTHOR OF "PINNACLE PETE," "SNAP SHOT
SAM," "THREE HANDSOME SPORTS,"
"FRESH FRANK," "OREGON, THE
SPORT WITH A SCAR," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE GOOD WORK BEGINS.

WHEN the Vigilantes rose at Oro Gulch there was good excuse for it, and they did their work up after a style that was effective, and in the main, just. Several men had been murdered in a way that was too bare-faced to suit even the slack morals of the Gulch, and there had been a number of robberies that had been so audacious as to be simply a challenge to the men who professed to believe in law and order. When Lame Barker was shot by a gambler who had been

cheating him most scandalously the people rose right up, and lynched the murderer off hand.

Having made a start it was thought best to make a thorough job of reforming the morals of the camp, and the meeting proceeded to go for several other noted characters, who had been more or less under suspicion, and against one or two of whom there was pretty tangible evidence. In the general clean-up they somehow managed to include a gentleman by the name of John Armstrong, a little sport who had been making the Gulch his field of operations for some weeks past.

There was no proof to show that the purity of his methods could be called into question, but his occupation was patent, and just then, in the spasm of virtuous indignation over the way the gamblers had been carrying on, it was not hard to make a case against him sufficiently grave to call for investigation. He had cleaned out one or two of the judges at draw, which made it evident enough that there was something wrong about him.

Mr. Armstrong had submitted to arrest with cheerful serenity and appeared before the assembled majesty of the Gulch without the least hesitation, or apparent unwillingness. It seemed to him rather a joke, and he positively refused to view the proceedings in any other light.

To the case stated he answered that there was a good deal of truth in the statement that he was a successful gambler, and innocently inquired if there was anything in that for which to hang a man?

The point was well taken, but, as the judges were in very serious earnest, and had a force to carry out their mandates, they paid little attention to it. It was a near thing that they did not decide on the rope in his case.

Some thought that was going a little too far, however, as there was no capital crime charged against Mr. Armstrong; and some thought him a rather good fellow, too. The result was, he was advised to emigrate, and was given an hour to do it in.

"Thank you kindly, gentlemen," was his mild answer. "I had thought of leaving, anyhow, so I cannot see any particular hardship, even if I question the justice of the sentence. Barney and I will be on the road before the expiration of the period set, and I think I can assure you that neither of us will let the light of his countenance dawn upon this benighted burg again. I have done fairly well since here, and I leave without regret, disappointment or anger."

At that there arose a murmur. It was notorious that Mr. Armstrong's pockets were well lined, and it seemed like a sinful loss of opportunity to allow him to go off with all the accumulated wealth of his two weeks' labors. That much was said, pretty plainly, by a number in the crowd; and the judges who had helped to swell his fortune appeared to think that the sentence might profitably receive a reconsideration. John Armstrong's pockets ought to be turned inside out, and their contents confiscated for the public weal.

Then Mr. Armstrong appeared to become about as serious as he usually allowed himself to get.

"Much obliged to you, gentlemen, for your complimentary attention; but don't try to smother me with kindness—I won't stand it. When a referee makes a decision once that's the end of it. I have submitted to my trial with that gentleness which has always been my distinguishing trait, and bowed to the mandate of the court. That settled it. I have one hour to leave town, and in that time no one has anything to do with me. Don't attempt to crowd me, gentlemen. If any one tries it on I assure you I will shoot him dead. As I understood it, my arrest was only a matter of form, so that I made no fight, and was allowed to retain my weapons. If the whole thing goes over from the start we may as well begin the fight right here and now, and I will give the best account of myself the case admits of. How is it, gentlemen; peace or war?"

It would have been possible to have brought him down by a foul shot; but with Mr. Armstrong's hands in his side pockets, and his keen eyes roving over the crowd, in search of the man that was going to attempt it, the operation would possibly be neither healthy nor profitable. The movement to reconsider was withdrawn, and Mr. Armstrong was allowed to depart with all his belongings, in the list of which Barney Kane made a conspicuous figure.

Barney had been attached to the service of Mr. Armstrong for some years, and was a very good little man himself. When on duty he thought of nothing else. When off duty he was a jovial, rollicking little Irishman, who could sing a good song, and hold his end up level under 'most all circumstances. He was sincerely attached to Armstrong, and though the manner of the latter to him sometimes might seem brusque to outsiders, there was a perfect understanding between them.

As Jacks stepped out of the circle of the crowd, Barney met him, unconcerned and smiling as though the assemblage was only a picnic, and they were honored guests.

"Sure, an' the horses are saddled, an' the

dunnage packed. Which way will we be after going?"

"Southward, Barney, if these gentlemen allow us to go at all. The period of profit has passed, and the hour for adventure is at hand. We have a fairly well-filled treasury, and so I feel like putting into effect a desire I have long had of exploring the Southern country. Who knows what may be in store for us?"

"Av it's not the rope, little do Oi care. An' the sooner we leave the Goolch the better," was his careless rejoinder, as he led the way toward where the saddled horses were awaiting, a few rods away.

Without delay the men mounted and ambled gayly from the camp.

"I confess that I am surprised at the way bluff went down," was the next remark of the little sport, when they had fairly left the limits of the town.

"They wanted the ducats we have been raking in, and they wanted them bad. Perhaps we have not seen the last of the virtuous portion of the population. I wouldn't be a bit surprised to see them coming out with swords and spears, trying to mop the ground up with us. Keep an eye out for them, Barney, and don't let them get within the breastworks. The court has had its say-so, and now we can show them all about the theory and practice of self-defense, and every last one of them that goes down is good and paid for."

"Thyrt me for that," responded Barney, reaching around to pat the Winchester that hung from his shoulder.

"It wor the worruk av me loife, kapein' from thryin' the dirty spalpeens a whack as it wor; an' av ye had said the word we w'd have gone in an' wracked the town. But whin there's company to the frint, Oi wait for or'thers, an' av ye didn't give me the wink it wor not me fault av we lift no blud on the grass. An', av ye pl'aze, South is a big country, an' it would be rela'vin' av me mind av ye give me a hint where Oi w'd be apt to foind ye av we got siperated."

"I don't provide for such contingencies, and haven't much use for a gentleman that gets separated. Of course, if I had any idea where I was going, I would have no objection to letting you into the secret; as I haven't, you will have to be as great a philosopher as myself, and wait to see where the fates intend to drift us. I will say, however, that if the camp has any idea of overhauling us again, we have given it an elegant chance. I see we have taken the old road; and if they come along through the 'cut-off' they can meet us, sure enough. It will be some little time, though, and there is no use to borrow trouble."

"Thru for yez. We can have toime enough to sorry for the poor craytures afther it's over. Mebbe it's wan av thim Oi say forinst me now."

They had just reached the crest of an elevation, and looking down the trail, Jack Armstrong could see the figure at which Barney pointed.

He gave his peculiar little laugh—one that was short and pleasant, and which had gone far toward giving him the sobriquet of Gentle Jack.

"Ha, ha, Barney! If they don't come out in stronger force than that, I think we can stand the racket. Your rustler from Oro happens to be a woman!"

Mr. Armstrong's eyesight was naturally keen, and it had been improved by much practice; otherwise he might not, at this first quick glance, have made the discovery that rather astonished the Irishman.

A woman it was, though she bestrode her animal after the fashion of the Mexican *caballero*, whose garb she had donned. The reason for the two having overtaken her, in spite of the rather slow pace at which they had been going, was more easily noted, since she was mounted on a mule, and the mule was refusing to go a step, though the rider's feet were scraping along its sides after a fashion that showed she was using her rowels the best she knew how.

Although she must have heard the horsemen approaching, the woman never turned her head as they cantered up, but looked straight along between the long ears of the perverse quadruped.

Jack confessed at all times to an unfailing interest in the gentler sex; but, as he said, he was never intrusive. Of course he stole a glance at the woman as he passed, but as she made no request for assistance, and actually appeared to be unaware of his presence, he rode straight on. It was no use to waste his time tipping his hat to an individual who was not looking at him.

Yet, after that glance, he was more interested than ever. From what little he saw of the half-averted face he decided that the young lady was young and handsome, and that, save in assuming the masculine garb, she had made no attempt to disguise her sex.

"Not so much mystery there, after all," thought Jack.

"Probably she is going on something of a journey, and is sensible enough to prefer ease and comfort to looks. She has a good seat in the saddle—all of these Mexicans have for that matter—but she don't seem to know much about a mule. I think I could get the creature out of

his sulks in about one minute by the clock. But I certainly shall not ask her to let me try."

Just then there was a clatter of feet behind, and glancing carelessly over his shoulder, Armstrong saw that the mule was coming on at a great rate. And now the girl—for she was but little more—was as anxious to hold him in as she had been before to have him go. As she retained her seat with an ease and grace that bespoke a practiced equestrian, and there seemed little danger of any accident, there was no cause to interfere, and Jack rather deliberately edged his horse to one side of the road to allow her to pass.

But nothing of the kind did she do. The mule ranged up alongside of Armstrong, and then fell into a steady trot that carried him easily along with his newly-found company.

At that the girl laughed. It was not a very mirthful laugh, but it showed that she was amused, at what one might have supposed would make her furiously angry.

Then she looked squarely at Armstrong as she spoke.

"I am sure I do not see what can be the matter with the brute. He has carried me a great many miles, and never cut up such a caper before. I suppose he is tired of the loneliness, and wants to have company. I don't care what you think about him, but you must pardon me if I intrude. When he has once proved that he can have his own way he will most likely let me have a say in the direction of our movements, so that I do not think I will trouble you long."

Of course Mr. Armstrong in his best manner denied that trouble could be mentioned in connection with a lady, offered to try his hand at making the mule more thoughtful for the wishes of his mistress, and said a number of other things after his own inimitable way, that required more or less of an answer, and all the time the mule trotted gravely along, supremely indifferent to the remarks that were made in regard to him. It really looked as though he had come to stay.

Then, just when the lady was about to offer some explanation as to why she was on the way, Barney spoke up.

"Sure, an' it's the cross-roads that's befrint av us. Will Oi say av the min from Oro have come down the cut-off?"

"No use for that, Barney," was the answer. "I see them there now!"

CHAPTER II.

THE MEETING AT THE CROSS-ROADS.

SURE enough, although they were partially concealed, it was not hard to detect a number of figures down the trail some little distance, halted under the cover of the mesquites.

They seemed to be waiting for some one, and they all were looking straight at the three. What their intentions were remained to be developed; but, as Jack had given a guess beforehand, their appearance was not unexpected or startling.

The girl looked uneasily at Mr. Armstrong. She could see there was something like a little army in wait, that was apparently strong enough to swallow the three up at a mouthful, if really inclined to dispute their passage.

"Who are they? What do they want?" were her questions to the sport, while she gave a tug at the bridle of her mule.

"It is probably a burial party from Oro," was the cool rejoinder.

"Or some might be inclined to call them lambs for the slaughter; victims, going blindly to the sacrifice. They probably want all they can get; and they suppose that includes John Armstrong. When the coming picnic is over somebody will be badly left; and in my opinion we will be able to pursue our journey unmolested. The more men the more chance for disappointment. I would advise you to keep judiciously in the background, however, and wait on the course of events. There is a great deal of uncertainty about such things, you know. I have actually been left myself on several occasions."

Was it possible that there was something like a sigh of relief on the part of the young girl at hearing this statement? At any rate, she did not seem to be alarmed at the warning, and relaxed the grip a little on the reins, though the instinctive movement had not checked the speed of her mule a particle.

"Don't scare you, does it? Glad to hear it, though it was sober truth I was telling. Better call a halt until you see what sort of a reception we meet with. These are people that have their regrets—that they didn't hang us when they had what they think was the chance, and are now about to try it over. There may be some shooting, and such like foolishness, and I would advise you to take a back seat in the congregation—at least until after the collection has been taken."

"You talk too carelessly to be at all alarmed about the result of the matter, and are too honest to be, or to have been, very far in the wrong. In addition, my mule will not take a back seat, whether I want him to do so or not. You will have to be burdened with me still, and I would not wonder if I did my share, to prove that I am not an ungrateful visitor. They

seem to be about to advance. In case it should be I that they are after, what do you intend to do about it?"

"Be your friend first, and allow you to tell me afterward what it means. If you were complimenting me a trifle, I think I can safely say something in return. When a woman is young, handsome, and has the right side of the argument, most any one is willing to back her. You will find me with you. Now, I would not court observation if I were you. There may be a hereafter, when I am not around; and it would be an unpleasant thing to be identified with the Armstrong interests. We will know in a moment what they want."

Sure enough, as they rode down into the other trail, the men came boldly from their lurking places, and advanced with drawn weapons.

"If you please, gentlemen," exclaimed Jack, in his softest tones for the distance: "Don't crowd the mourners so early in the game. You have such an abandoned look that I must really ask you to draw back, and allow us to pass on."

The challenge was received with something like silent contempt, for there was no direct answer. The foremost man turned so that he could catch the eye of the next, and muttered:

"This must be the party. Never saw any of them myself, but it's just the lively sort of a crowd that I expected to hear when we overhauled them. Looks kind of dangerous for a bantam, too. Better not run many risks, but have it over as soon as we can."

"Bantam, blazes!"

The fellow who spoke was looking sharply at Mr. Armstrong, and was evidently both surprised and disgusted.

"If that's your party there's a good man at the head of it. It's Gentle Jack, as sure as preaching; and it's not your say-so about the risks. Bet you a dollar that he has you lined already. Suppose you run this thing. I'm tired."

To the others the name of Armstrong seemed unknown, and there was no particular terror connected with it. The leader uttered a grim laugh.

"You are an interesting sort of a man to invite to a tea party. If you haven't any more sand than that, you had better get back somewhere in the rear till the thing is settled and pay-day is over. I can't see that you are going to be much use here. I reckon that we knew what we were about when we stepped in on this frolic, and if you don't want to earn the money, the sooner you get out the better. I guess I won't back down for one man to-day; and the rest of you ought to be able for that red-headed little fellow in the background. You see that they don't run away, and I'll take care of the rest."

Meantime Jack had been steadily advancing, followed at a very brief interval by the others. Of course he was watching the proceedings, though he evinced no anxiety as to what the men might want, or what they were going to do with the weapons that had been so freely displayed at the very outset. The captain of the other side having settled his unruly member, turned his attention again to Armstrong.

"Hands up, Mister Man! I don't know who you are, and I don't know that I care, as my business is not with you. Some fellows will be fools; and that's all that need make trouble between you and me."

"Which same is a very frank admission, and if you keep on heaving such chunks of wisdom at me I'll begin to think that there may be a streak of sense about you, after all. Your business stand is somewhere up the trail, and I don't think of going that way. Good-morning! Perhaps I'll have a chance to see you later."

Mr. Armstrong spoke with an easy confidence, and touched his horse lightly, so that he quickened his pace.

As Barney and the young lady were right at his heels it seemed possible that the little party would give the go-by to the men who were hesitating what course to take. To the threats, and the flourishing of firearms, Mr. Armstrong paid no attention, and, so far, his manner had been more and more impressive the longer it was studied—to say nothing of the fact that the words of the man who had recognized the little sport were beginning to have their natural effect. Gentle Jack did not look half as small as he had done when he first dawned on them, coming down the trail. If it had not been for the leader the bluff would have won without further question.

But, the man who was at the head of the party was not easy to bluff; and just now was very much in earnest. He raised his hands, that had been temporarily drooping, and his pistols were again pointed in the direction of Mr. Armstrong.

"I don't want to pick trigger, young man; but if you are so fresh that you won't take good advice when you hear it I suppose there is no other way. It's the last time of asking. Halt, and hands up!"

At the reiterated request, this time made in the savage tone of a man who is in deadly earnest, Jack to the surprise of everybody, threw up his digits, at the same time, in an easy undertone, remarking to Barney:

"Get out of here as fast as you know how, and

I will join you as soon as I get rid of the fools. You two would be a bother if the work once actually begins."

Then, by a pressure of the knees, he made his horse turn slightly, and move straight toward the man who had insisted on his stopping.

The movement left the way clear for Barney, who silently pressed his spurs to the flank of his horse. The result was that Kane's steed darted away at a great rate, followed by the mule. It was a close brush; but the two swept by before a hand could be outstretched to detain them.

"Stop them! After them!" shouted the fellow who was managing the affair. "Shoot their horses down if you can't get her any other way; but don't harm the girl. As for you, young man, you are heaping up a lot of trouble for yourself. I guess we will have to take you back with us, and I may as well clap the dardies on now, as wait till you have done more mischief. Hold out your hands!"

"With the greatest of pleasure," smiled Jack, pushing his horse still nearer, and extending his wrists with an air of the most perfect good faith. "I know when it is time to come down; and when a gentleman connected with the law talks about putting on the handcuffs I have no use for more foolishness. But, I want you to please remember that I have made no resistance, nor done anything that the courts can take notice of. Of course, when a man is stopped on the highway, by a stranger who gives no explanation of his business, he has a right to try to defend himself. And so, you see—down goes your meat-shop."

There was a sudden change in the tone of Gentle Jack, and it was accompanied by a very unexpected movement. The quiet submission was all a sham. His hand dropped suddenly to the knee of the fellow who was just producing a pair of handcuffs; then there was a dexterous twirl of the foot, that applied a spur sharply to the horse that was already growing restive; and the man was canted out of the saddle so neatly that he had no fair idea of how it was done—nor did he know for the next five minutes what had happened.

Jack did not have to stop to examine. He was sure that there was no more trouble to be looked for from that direction, and he went on for the little knot of horsemen, who were racing along at headlong speed, just in front of him.

It would have been easy enough, during the next couple of minutes, for the sport to have got in work enough to have settled the game. He was an expert with the revolver, and was near enough to make two or three shots with certainty before the enemy could halt, turn, and get a glimpse of him. After the way in which he had been attacked they could hardly have accused him of taking an unfair advantage, and under the circumstances most any other man might have gone in for slaughter.

Mr. Armstrong was not of that kind, however. He never used his weapons until all other means had failed, and was slow, even then, to shed blood. As no one had noticed the downfall of the ruling spirit of the attempt it was safe to try the same game over. A word to his horse, to send it along at an increased rate of speed, and before his coming was noticed he had ranged up alongside of the nearest of the men, and by the same dexterous movement tilted him out of the saddle. That left things even. Barney and the young lady were in hot retreat, to be sure; but the Irishman could be relied on to be about when he was needed, and the mule with its rider would be apt to come with him. That would make the sides equal—three to three, and the men that held the drop would have all the advantage. Mr. Armstrong's pistols came out at last, and then he shouted:

"You men there, hold hard! We have the dead medicine on you, sure. It's die dog, or eat the hatchet. You hear me?"

They heard him, sure enough. At the unexpected hail there was an immediate pulling in of horses, and three hasty glances backward.

What the men saw was not encouraging. There was Gentle Jack, with his revolvers trained in their direction, and behind him they could see two of their party lying motionless on the ground, with two riderless mustangs running almost at Mr. Armstrong's side. The tables had commenced to turn with a vengeance. It was folly to continue the pursuit as long as they had such a foe in the rear; and from the looks of things, successful retreat was about out of the question. The best thing to be done was to turn, and either temporize or fight it out.

The men did not lose their presence of mind. One of them did stop short and wheel almost as though on a pivot; but the others attempted a flank movement, and would no doubt have circled about so as again to have Jack at a disadvantage, but the sport was ready for that. He threw up his left hand; there was a report; and down went one of the horses, throwing his rider far over his head. Then Armstrong gave the two one more chance.

"It's the last time of asking. Hands up, and fingers empty. Keep them away from those irons or I shoot to kill."

"An' betther it is to down wid thim, onnyhow," chimed in a voice from the rear. "Av ye have that wan covered it's this wan that Oi'm

able for. Spake the worrud an' it's the whole outfit that we'll be afther takin' in."

Barney was so near to the fellow he referred to that he made him start when he spoke; and, as the remaining man saw that if Armstrong's finger only tightened he was a dead man, the victory was won.

"Hands are up; now, what are you going to do about it?" asked the one who was covered by Armstrong's muzzles, elevating his empty hands; and his companion silently followed his example.

CHAPTER III.

TWO OF ONE MIND.

"THAT'S hearty," returned Jack, not at all relaxing his vigilance at the unconditional surrender.

"I can't say that I have anything particular to do beyond protecting myself. At least, I haven't tried anything else, so far. I suppose I ought to have shot first and reasoned with you about it afterward; but, I have a heap of curiosity, and if I had done that I might never have found out what was the meaning of all this racket. You don't exactly look as though you were on the road-agent lay, and yet that would be the nearest I could come to it if I had to make a guess. Of course, that nonsense about the handcuffs and the law was all a pack of bosh. I haven't been doing anything, and you would hardly be such fools as to arrest Jack Armstrong on suspicion."

"Why, blast it! we didn't want you at all—not that I know of. It was that other party there, that woman with the boy's duds on, that we meant to corral. We have the papers for her all right, and if you hadn't been so fresh in chipping in there wouldn't have been a mite of trouble. I tell you, you have got yourself in a heap bad snap interfering with us. Pet Parker is a terror to have on your trail; and if you haven't killed him outright you can bet he will run you in."

"Mr. Pet Parker—if that is the name of the amiable gentleman who is bossing your outfit—will have enough to do for the next ten minutes or so, repairing damages. By that time we will have vanished—the lady going her way, and Barney and I going ours. I would not like to see her fall into your clutches, but that is her lookout. I never saw her before ten minutes ago; and it is not likely that I will ever have the pleasure of meeting her again. But, I would request you to warn Mr. Parker that, if he stops me again, without mentioning a responsible and reputable business in the outset, he will not find me quite so long-suffering. When a man treats me as though he was after plunder, he must expect me to protect myself the best I know how. And I know a heap, as you ought to suspect by this time. Now, shuck yourselves—of your tools, I mean. I'm not running any chances. You may be the bloodiest kind of road-agents, after all."

"But, see here. We have the papers to show for what I have been telling you; and if you are a square man you won't want to meddle with us. All you can ask for is that we let you go about your business as long as we don't find you meddling with ours."

"I'm not asking anything, young man. I am only telling you what you are to do; and you had better be doing it before I begin to talk a little louder. You can't throw me off guard by any of your chaff; and you can't gain another minute of time. Hand over your tools, or I'll fix you so you won't want them for about a month of Sundays. I am a tolerably even-tempered man, but I begin to get mad."

It may have been a little hard to believe that the mild-featured young man, who spoke in such an even tone, was really in earnest, but, somehow, there was something about his manner that carried conviction. There was no more hesitation. The two, under the direction of Armstrong, let Barney relieve them of their belts; and waited patiently until the Irishman had examined them in a hasty way for other weapons. They made no threats, but it was pretty easily seen that they would have been willing to do some savage shooting and carving if they could accomplish it without too much risk. Then they crawled off of their horses, saw the animals started up the trail, and, a moment later, were standing there, listening to the retreating footsteps of Mr. Armstrong and his party.

"All of which goes to show how a man may be mistaken," remarked Jack, when they had obtained a fair offing, and had moderated their pace to an easy canter.

"I could have sworn that I saw some of the magnates of Oro in the front rank, and would have wagered a thousand or so that they were after me. It looked like an elegant chance to get even, and I had begun to pity the poor fellows in advance. When I found out the mistake, and that it was a set of strangers I had to deal with, of course I had to draw it mild. But it looks as though you had some friends that were extra concerned for your welfare. Do you think there are any more of the same kind lurking around in the bushes, or have we discouraged the whole lot at the send-off?"

The first part of this was addressed to Barney;

but as the Irishman did not always find time to answer when his master made remarks of a general nature, he was not at all put out when Jack turned from him to the young lady; though he was curious enough to know what would be her reply.

"I am sure I am very much obliged to you for your brave defense. It was so much better to be able to manage it that way than to have to kill two or three of them, which was what I expected when the affair opened. I have been in fear and trembling for hours—ever since I was sure that they had struck my trail—lest I should have to defend myself in a way that would mean death to some one. And what could one woman have done with five desperate men like those? Really, our meeting was quite providential."

"Return your thanks to the mule, then, if you feel that way. He seems to have been the humble instrument to accomplish a heap of good. As to the men—they were not just as desperate as they looked, or I never could have got the dead medicine on them after such an easy fashion. I hope, for your sake, that we have seen the last of them; though, with a steady front, and a revolver in each hand, I am not sure but what you could bluff the whole of them. Should they attempt to meddle with you again, you might try it anyhow."

"Thanks! I will. But I have not answered the question you asked me; nor have I given you any explanation of who I am, and why I am thus pursued. You intimated that after you had taken my part, and driven those fellows away, you would expect some information on those points, and as you have not failed me, I feel that the information is your due. You will scarcely care to listen to a long story, so I will only tell you in brief that—"

"You are a very much persecuted young woman. That is all right. I was willing to accept you on sight, and I don't ask you for any explanation unless it can be for your benefit. I suppose we will part company before long, and after that it will make but little difference whether I know all that you might tell me or not. For the present we had better be getting as far away from the friends we have just left behind us as we possibly can. They may come again with a rush, and they won't be in any humor to listen to reason. If you don't want to hurt them hard, you had better spare them the interview."

The advice was not given because Mr. Armstrong had any fears for the result of another meeting, so far as he himself was concerned; but for the purpose of calling the attention of the young lady to the probabilities of the case. Without further effort at explanation she hastily agreed to what he had been saying and the three rode on for some time in silence.

At last they came to a spot where the trail divided, and here Mr. Armstrong halted. When the Oro Vigilantes completed their work with the expatriation of the little sport, the day was already pretty well advanced, and now in the declining sun they began to see a suggestion that evening was almost at hand, and that it was about time to consider the questions of the near future.

"I don't know much about this country, as I never was around here before," remarked the sport; "but I have been told that there is a sort of tavern along down the trail, perhaps a dozen miles. It's the only chance for you to get a roof for the night, and I think you had better take it. As I figure it out, your friends will get along here a little before sundown, and will look around for traces that will show which way you have gone. What is the matter with arranging for them?"

"Thanks; but I do not care to have them overhaul me about the time I am enjoying my beauty sleep. Of course they would not pass that same cabin without examining it to see if I had been there, and I know well enough that in this country you cannot conceal your presence if only a little bird knows of it."

"No doubt that Parker knows of the cabin I am speaking of; but I think it could be arranged so that he would not visit it at all. Barney's horse is certainly a better animal than your mule. Suppose he trades with you. Then he wanders off on this right hand road, I take to the brush, and you go on to Miguel's ranch. If they catch up with Mr. Kane I will wager it will not be in time for them to get back here before morning; and by that time you can be on your way rejoicing."

"But I am not going to make my way in that direction at all. Here is precisely where I had intended to turn off myself. I have a fair start, and if I can evade those men until to-morrow morning it is not likely they will be able to overhaul me soon, unless they are bent on running the chances of what looks very much like suicide."

"But, if you follow this trail no doubt you will have to camp out all night, besides being in a worse box to-morrow night. You don't seem to know that the desert is in front of you, and that when you once set your foot on that it is more than likely you will never come back. You can hardly have any business in that direction."

"Indeed, but I have. That is the direction in which I turned my face, in the first place; and so far I have met with nothing that I think ought to turn me back. You are a stranger to me, but you have already done me such good service that I have little hesitation in confiding to you my purposes. You cannot understand them without hearing more of the story of my past life than there is time at present to tell you. Of course I appreciate the sacrifice that you were going to make in dropping your own affairs to lead my pursuers off of the trail, and I give you my warmest thanks for your good intentions, though I will not accept the service. We may as well say good-by, here and now. It is not likely that we will meet again. If we do, I hope it will be under more pleasant circumstances, and more favorable surroundings. There; do not let me detain you any longer. Good-by. Luck go with you."

She waved her hand down the trail, nodded to the two men, and then spoke to her mule, as she gave a firm tug at its bridle. She was evidently bent on parting company.

"In the nature of things it is not exactly proper for us to be traveling companions, I suppose," retorted Jack, looking with a covert smile at the mule, which had dropped its head, hung its ears forward, and planted its four feet together in a way that suggested that it did not intend to allow forty horses to drag it a step forward in the direction its mistress wished to go.

"You can have your choice whether you or we are to lead the way. If you elect to go first I assure you that we will follow at a discreet distance. If Barney and I are in the advance you will not be apt to overtake us, unless some misfortune has done the same thing. Which shall it be? Or do you want to leave the choice to fate? If so we can toss up for the lead."

The girl did not appear to notice the obstinacy of her mule. She listened thoughtfully to Mr. Armstrong; and after he was done, waited for a minute before she returned any answer.

"Perhaps if you would tell me where you intend to go it might make matters a great deal simpler. Of course, I do not want to pry into your secrets, especially after the way that you have respected mine; but it begins to seem as though we were thrown together for the campaign, and could not part company if we tried."

"There is never much of a secret about my intentions; though I'll admit that more than half the time I have none to be mysterious over. I left Oro with no definite point in view, but, since then, I have found one. I have had a sneaking idea for some time that when I had leisure I would like to look in on a gentleman who is said to have a peculiar sort of a ranch down somewhere to the Southeast. I don't know that the expedition is likely to be profitable, but it seems to me that it promises lots of fun."

"You mean that you intend to search for the 'King of the Camels?'"

"I believe that is what they call him. From all accounts he is a queer sort of a crank, and just the kind of a man I like to meet when I have the leisure to study him."

"Singular!" said the girl, glancing at Mr. Armstrong thoughtfully. "You must be telling the truth, and yet it seems hard to believe."

"Why so?" asked Jack briskly.

"Because, as it happens, that is where I am going myself!"

CHAPTER IV.

MR. ARMSTRONG GIVES FAIR WARNING.

"I RECKON you haven't started out on the trip without knowing something about what you expected to do," answered Armstrong, betraying no surprise at the statement. "If you can give me any pointers on the subject, you will place me under obligations. And, meanwhile, we may as well be moving along. If we stay here at the cross-roads much longer, we will see Pet Parker and his army rising over the hill. When you are ready to part company, you can choose your own way of going."

"Perhaps it would be as well for us not to part at all—at least, for the present. We may be of mutual aid, and as I have already tried to assure you, I have no fear that you will not deal honestly with me. There will be money at stake, or that which will bring money; but with me that is only a secondary matter. What do you say? To you the profits of the expedition; to me, the—well, whatever else I can find to make out of it."

She extended her hand gracefully, and with a motion that was frankness itself; and Mr. Armstrong, in no whit backward, grasped it in his own warm, soft hand, as he exclaimed:

"Good enough! Pard we are, in the venture. Jack Armstrong has been accused of a great many things in his time, but no one ever said that he went back on the party he once shook hands with, and called by that name. You are as safe with me as though I was your father; and all you have got to do is to tell me what you want, and if I don't get it for you, it will be because it's not in the wood."

"Verry foine it all is," broke in Barney, "but av yez moves back a shtip or two, ye will be

after sayin' that the spalpeens are ag'in on the war-path, an' will be 'round in wan howly minnit ave ye don't take some m'anes to sarkimvint thim. Whin ye dhrap thim out av soight will be toime enough to be after makin' yer plans—bahd 'cess to 'im, anyhow! It's nothin' but thrubble an' vixathion av speerit that'll iver come to thim. Don't Oi know? Sure, an' av ye had thraveled wid Misther Armstrong as long as Oi have, ye w'ad be after knowin' that it is thrubble he is in four-thirds av the toime; an' great thrubulation for the balance. Av ye know whin ye are well off, it's him that ye will lit alone. He's a way about him; maybe it's all blarney an' blandishmint, but whin wan gits outther his power, it's not for loife that wan gives thim up. An' as for the King av the Camils—Oi have heard av him, an' a bad man he is, from 'way back; an' he'll be apt to ate ye both. It's a cannibal he is, an' a divil on two sthicks, to boot."

"That will do, Barney," interrupted Armstrong, who had allowed him to run on until he was almost out of breath. "We understand all about the gentleman you are trying to defame; and if we don't, we are in a fair way to find out the balance. He is a good ways off, at the best; while Parker and his satellites seem to be in the near future. Confine your remarks to the latter if you must talk. Under the circumstances, perhaps I had better leave you here to meet them. You are of no great account anyhow, while I wouldn't wonder if I should turn out to be the mainstay and dependence of the outfit."

"Sure, an' av ye lit me the contrahct, it's me livil bist Oi will do to carry me ind. Av the leddy will lind me her hat an' mule it's a chase Oi will lade thim, an' join ye layther on."

"Not a bad scheme, if you choose to undertake it; but it must be put into execution quickly if you want it to amount to anything. What do you say, miss? You understand that I am not running away because I have any fears that the gentlemen in the rear could take us into their camp when we said no, after a positive fashion; but it is always as well to avoid an altercation when it is possible, and I am anxious not to give them any fresh cause of complaint, or do anything that might induce the world at large to join in the chase that I see they are determined to carry on while there is hope and a trail."

"Have it as you wish," responded the young lady, without hesitation.

"When I think that your knowledge or judgment is as good, or better, than mine I will not be likely to offer any suggestions. So long as we escape them I do not care much what means are employed. Whatever is best will suit me."

"Thin, up wid you!" exclaimed Barney, who had already dismounted, and led his horse to her side.

Without further explanation the transfer was made. Barney mounted the mule with a catlike activity that gave it no chance to object to the change of riders until he was fairly seated; and then he urged it off, down the trail, with an energy that admitted of very little questioning. At the same time Mr. Armstrong turned away to follow the track that led to the right, his charge keeping closely by his side.

Fortunately, the moment they left the main trail they were hidden from the view of any one who might be coming down the road; and they did not have far to go before they were out of the cross-roads. To be out of sound as well as sight Jack forced the pace for a little, though it was soon moderated into a dog-trot. In half an hour they were quite a distance from the spot where they parted company with the Irishman, and were feeling pretty well assured that they would not be troubled, for some time at least, by Pet Parker and his gang. By the time the sun went down they had reached a convenient camping-place, and came to the conclusion that it might be best to stop there for the night. As yet there were no signs of Barney, but Mr. Armstrong did not feel at all anxious on his account, saying that Kane was abundantly able to take care of himself, and would appear again whenever he got ready.

The young lady had no reason to feel bad over the exchange she had made. Barney had left his supplies with her, and between them, and the ones carried by Jack it was possible to make quite a good meal. And Barney's blankets would make her comfortable for the night. She might be lonesome, but she felt safe. It was not likely that her pursuers would stumble upon her before morning, if they came at all.

After the supper had been discussed, and the things put away, the two lingered around the remnants of the camp-fire. If they had anything to say it was a good time to say it.

"There is one thing you forgot to mention," remarked Jack. "I suppose that you have a name, and I would like to hear it pronounced, the way it is down on the small bills. We have confidence in each other, and are in for a campaign together."

"There need be no mystery with you about my name. To some others I might not care to mention it, since I am not anxious to have it repeated openly, until I have accomplished my mission. After that I care not who knows

where I have been and what I have done. I should be called Magdalena Winter. At present I am trying to be known as Irene Spring. You may think of me by either title; but for the present you must address me by the latter."

"Winter? Spring? The transposition is not original, and the difference is just of the kind to attract attention. Some other name than Spring might have served your purpose better; but that is none of my affair. Have it to suit yourself. Miss Irene it will be to the end of the present chapter. And now, may I ask you what end you have in view in making the journey that you propose? And I might be induced to listen to an explanation of what induced Mr. Pet Parker to follow you so hard, and run such risks to effect your capture. That astute detective, from what I have heard of him, is not inclined to spend his time in making water hauls, or laboring for the good of humanity at large or in particular, unless there is money in it. If he had not come with authority you would not have been so anxious to avoid him, but would doubtless have appealed to the chivalry of Oro, and trusted to his receiving a quietus, for the time at least."

"You talk too much, Mr. Armstrong. You don't allow me a chance to get in the explanations that I am anxious to make. I suppose Parker is honest enough in his intentions; but, unfortunately, he has papers to support him, and he intends to take me back to those who would put me in a lunatic asylum. I might not care to state that to some persons, but you are wise enough to judge for yourself as to my sanity, and I am not afraid to trust to your decision. The worst of it is, I cannot give a reason for the plot that I know only too well has an existence, unless it be to prevent this expedition. Yet I have made no confidant, and it seems hard to think that there is any one who could read my thoughts before they were fairly formed. I believe one of the strongest grounds they can have for impeaching my mental soundness is the fact that I believe the stories told of the man we have mentioned as the King of the Camels. To most he may seem only a myth, but from the moment I first heard of him I believed, and vowed that one day, when I was able, I would search him out in his kingdom, and wring from him the truth."

As she went on Magdalena grew somewhat excited. Jack was watching her a great deal closer than he seemed, for he took more interest in life than he usually allowed appearances to indicate. He did not yearn to travel with a lunatic, and if this was a young lady who was afflicted with any mental imbecility, he was a great deal more likely to direct her back to her friends than make her his companion in a desperate adventure in the desert. It is true that he was a knight-errant by nature, but he was particular about the cases he picked up, and had no desire for company that was not little less foolhardy than himself.

There was nothing about the young lady that looked to him like insanity. He rather believed in the King of the Camels himself. That any one else should do so seemed sensible enough. If she had a good and sufficient reason, as he presumed that she did, there was no objection that he could see to her hunting that mythical individual up. As for the risks in the operation, she must be the judge whether it was worth her while to take them. He answered her deliberately:

"I can't say that I see anything like insanity in a desire to get to the bottom of the mystery, though there are not many women who would be willing to make the attempt. I have got the story very straight, about him and his little kingdom; though it may not be so easy to find it. I am willing to hazard my neck on it, why should not you? That is about the way to talk it, I suppose; though women don't generally pan out well as explorers."

"And woman don't generally have the incentives that I have, to urge them on. When they do they make a record equal to the best. It is not for the sake of any wild adventure, I assure you, that I am putting myself in what I know is the line of positive danger. That may be well enough for you; but you would think me mad enough if I admitted such a thing. No; it is to solve the mystery of the disappearance of one who was dearer than life to me—perhaps—though that may be but the wildest of hopes—to bring him to life again."

"Any hope is better than none at all," sagely remarked Mr. Armstrong. "I may be wrong, but from what I have seen of you I fancy that you either have, or ought to have, at your control plenty of wealth. Would it not have been better if you had intrusted the business to someone better fitted to meet the dangers and difficulties that you must know are in the way? If it will do any good I will advise you to turn back, even now, much as I would like to have a more sympathetic partner than Barney in the venture I am about to make."

"To be well served one must serve himself, or herself. Where could I have found the man upon whom I could rely in the matter? Why, they would take all the money I could pour into their hands, and then, at the first danger, would come crawling back, saying that there was no

such man, or that the service I desired was one that was an impossibility. I know the lot, and great scamps they are—the men who could be had to undertake the work that I would have for them to do."

"I should judge that you have had some experience with the tribe from the way in which you describe them. They are just that kind—at least the ones are whom you would be likely to meet with further back, hugging the towns, and making a boast of what they had done, and what they could do. But there are others, whom you might meet with if you went further, who would consider it a labor of love to work for a woman in distress; would even furnish the means to prosecute the work. If you had gathered together a little army you would not have made yourself any too safe. There are dangers of the desert; without a guide you will be apt to perish from them. There are worse dangers that you will have to face should you ever get to what may be called the end of your journey; and then, without strong backing you have the second probability of going under. If you find the 'king,' what are you going to with him? He is not a man to listen to reason or prayers; and if you have not force at your back you will be crushed."

"You forget that I have you."

His warnings did not seem to move her, or, if they had any effect it was rather to furnish amusement. There was actually something of a roguish smile on her face, as she looked up at her vis-a-vis; and she smiled again, if a little wanly, as in all good faith Jack soberly answered:

"That is so."

And then she gave a little start as she heard sounds from the shrubbery behind them.

"Och, Mickey McGlural has wan purthy daughter!" sung a voice that he did not at once recognize.

Then the singer broke off, and in another and decidedly less rollicking tone added:

"Bahd 'ciss to yez! will yez howld yer oogly head straight? Kape in the middle av the road, as the song says; an' more be towkin there's no road at all, at all. Ah! Howly Moses! Phat's that? An' down yez goes, onnyhow!"

And, as a period to the exclamation, there was the sharp crack of a revolver, that was immediately followed by a most unearthly scream.

Mr. Armstrong had listened without betraying the least agitation at the approach. He could recognize Barney as far as he could be heard, and was expecting him along about this time, moreover. But at the report and the cry his listlessness disappeared most magically. He sprang to his feet, a revolver in either hand, and stood between Miss Winter and the possible danger.

CHAPTER V.

THE MAN WITH THE COUGAR.

QUICK as were the movements of Mr. Armstrong, he had hardly thrown himself into position for defense when Barney Kane made his appearance. He came in a hurry, and it was the mule that brought him. Snorting wildly, the animal rushed directly toward the camp-fire, and actually sprang over it in its eagerness either to escape the danger it had just encountered, or to place itself once more alongside of the horse belonging to Jack, which was tethered a few yards away from his master.

As the long-eared quadruped halted suddenly, and stood quivering by Armstrong's picket-rope, Barney rolled off its back, and darted away again, as silent now as he had been loud-spoken before.

If he hoped to surprise the object that had startled him a minute before, he was mistaken. In that light, looking for any one, or anything, hidden in the shadows, was worse than a search for the legendary needle of the haystack. Under cover of his movement Mr. Armstrong had taken the opportunity to draw his young friend away from the fire, so that neither of them might offer quite so fair a mark, if there was any attack. After at least five minutes of silence he called to the Irishman:

"No use, Barney; the party has skipped for the night. Come out here and tell us what it was all about, anyhow. Sounded like a cat in a sack, with the strings untied. Was it a tiger? and what in blazes did you mean, letting your gun go off in that fashion?"

"Sure, an' there was a tiger to the frint; but there war a man in the rare," answered Barney, popping out of the shrubbery as suddenly as he had entered it.

"The spalpeen wor a-lyin' over yonder, a-list'nin' to all he could hear, an' had the b'aste on the lookout for him. It's meself rode 'most over him, an' that same w'd Oi have done av the mule had held his nose straight. Whin he joomped Oi seen thim both, an' wor riddy according. Av Oi missed thim it wor somethin' quare."

"Guess you must have been dreaming. If there had been any one but your own immortal self I would have been apt to have heard of him. The private demijohn happened to be with the other effects that you turned over to Miss Spring or I might think that it was a case of something worse than nightmare."

"Bahd luck to yez, av ye don't bel'ave me; but Oi see'd thim wid me own two eyes, an' it wor for no good they wor prowlin' 'round."

"A man and a tiger," muttered Jack, reflectively. "I have heard of such a pair, and perhaps you are right; but dreaming over it won't do any good; and now that we are awake I guess they won't come near the camp again without our getting on to the effort. Let them go for the present, and give us a report of operations while you refresh the inner man a little. You must have got some tall work out of that mule to be around again so early in the evening."

"It's Mither Armstrong that's the boss wid the expeditshun, an' Barney's willin'," responded the Irishman, as he threw himself carelessly by the fire. "Oi have the hunger av an anny-condy, but maybe Oi had better talk than ate. Sure, an' it's a foine chase that Oi led the b'yes, an' luck befri'ndid me. Whin Oi had doublid in an' doublid out Oi met a mon; an' Oi askid him the way to Miguel's shanty, an' av he had sane anything av foive min; an' thim Oi got scarrit, an' rode off widout waitin' for an answer. But Oi saw thim stroiking out for the ranch, an' av they can worrit ye afore mornin' Oi'll ate thim meself. Whist! Oi think Oi hear the tiger; an' beloike, the mon is comin' wid him."

Listening without movement of the head to show that he had his suspicions, Jack could hear the soft tread that had attracted Barney's attention. It was at no great distance, and when he glanced carelessly up his eyes rested on the figure of a man, who was gliding slowly out of the mesquites, with the cat-like step of the companion who crept along at his heels.

The strange pair—the man and the cougar—came quietly; but without the semblance of fear. The man threw himself down by the fire, while the great cat sat at his side, and with raised head surveyed Mr. Armstrong's little party over his master's shoulder. The firelight, low and flickering though it was, illuminated the faces of both man and beast, showing off the wild beauty that was undeniably present in each in the best possible way.

The appearance of the strangers was no doubt an unpleasant surprise to Miss Winter, but she showed no traces of alarm, and was every whit as cool as Gentle Jack himself. The latter glanced over at the intruder carelessly, meeting the bright black eyes on the other side of the fire with a serenity that was always his own.

"Hope I see you, pard. I did think that you were going to think the matter over, and perhaps not come at all. That would have been an awful disappointment. Barney wanted the chance to prove that he was not yarning about what he saw over there in the bushes. Hope he didn't bark you with his snap-shot. He generally hits about as he aims, but now and then will make a miss. He don't have the constant practice that one must have to keep his hand in. You are Aztec Alf, are you not—the man with the tiger?"

The gaze of the man was now as unblinking as that of his companion, while he listened to Jack with that strange stare that would have made an ordinary man uncomfortable to encounter at such a time, and under such circumstances. There was something uncanny about the pair. At the question he simply nodded, without ever taking his eyes away from those of Armstrong. In that he was different from the tiger, which shifted her glance uneasily when it happened to be met fully by that of the young lady.

"I thought of you as soon as Barney told me what he had seen back there in the brush, and was rather glad that he had missed; though, if I had noticed you spying around the camp, I might have tried a shot at you myself; and I needn't tell you that would be certain death. When I am out on a business excursion of this kind, I mostly use a long barrel with plenty of caliber. Barney is too apt to flip away with his derringers, because they come handy."

"Where are you going?" suddenly asked the man, paying no attention to what Jack had been saying. "Men who come this way do not intend to stop. And if they go further, there are only two ending places to choose from. Most men are in no hurry for either."

"Um! I think I understand. Above, or below? You are of the Reformed school, that does not believe in the intermediate place. I hope that we can make a fourth landing, that has nothing to do with any of the places. Meantime, as we don't know anything about your motives, it may be as well to say nothing of our actual destination until we find out what interest you can have in it, one way or another."

"You are right after the ordinary run of men; but you are wrong according to the Gentle Jack standard," retorted the man with the tiger. "If you were yourself you would not care who knew where you were going; and if it was an enemy you had in front of you, you would tell him for fear that he wouldn't ask you. You see, I have heard of you. It don't speak well for me, but I may as well add that when I was lying over yonder, I heard nearly every word you and this lady said, and know the answer to my question almost as well as if you had told me off-hand when I asked you. You are going to hunt for

the castle of the King of the Camels. Good enough. I am going to hunt for it, too. Perhaps I will stand as reasonable a chance to find it as either of you two. Other men have tried, and failed. Some of them have never come back to tell whether they have found it or no. Perhaps it may not be as hard to discover as some have thought. Only—when once reached, there has been so far no coming back."

He spoke thoughtfully, and with an air of gloom in his face, but his words were those of a sane man. Jack Armstrong listened to them attentively. He had heard of this man, known as Aztec Alf, or, more frequently called, Desert Alf. He was a nomad; a waif; a man of the desert; one who was but seldom seen save far away from the haunts of man; but seldom seen or heard from, even then. If it had not been for his strange companion, he might not have been the subject for speculation that he was, among those who at times spoke of him. No one knew that he had done anything worthy of chronicle. He was not even a hermit. Why he lived alone on the plains or among the mountains, with only a large cougar for a companion—always restless, always wandering, scarcely ever approaching those whom he saw at a distance, had been discussed more than once in Mr. Armstrong's hearing. Now that he was face to face with the nomad, he was willing to know more of him, and it seemed as though the opportunity was offered. If Desert Alf was speaking in good faith, and was as sane a man as he was sound, Jack would not ask for a better piece of luck than to have such a man for a companion and guide across the land that was to him an unknown region, save for the information that he had picked up listening to those who had but scant knowledge of the wastes before him.

"You are not a mile off. We have turned our faces in the direction of the Camel King mystery, and we are going to solve it before we turn them away from it. We expect to be an exception to those who have gone before us. We will come back in due course of time. Whether we are going to give the world the benefit of our experience is another matter. That will depend. If you want to go along there is room in the party for you and your pet. I reckon that is what it all amounts to that you have been saying. But that self-same pet must behave itself. We don't want any of what Barney would call its blishments—not, at least, until after we have become better acquainted. The lady of the sharp teeth may be a friend to tie to, but I don't want her to tie to me. That is likely to be the splitting point of the organization. If you can guarantee her a good moral character, Alfred, and then see that she acts up to her reputation, everything will be lovely."

"Poor Draco!" answered Alf, turning somewhat, and laying his hand caressingly on the cougar, that now crouched at his side, her face upturned, with the air of one who was listening greedily to what was being said.

"She is truth itself, and she is saying as plainly as she can that she has fallen in love with you at first sight. She will never leave me altogether, I hope; but, if you choose, she would give you something very like allegiance on the spot. I think she has even forgiven your Irishman, who tried his best to take her life—for which I do not blame him, by the way, since any man, under the circumstances, would have done the same. Treat her with confidence and I swear to you that she will never abuse it. She is but a brute, and some people might think that, like all cougars, she was a very savage one to boot, but she is very fond of me, and has saved my life two or three times over, and I doubt not but that she will do it again. If not, and the time comes, I am sure that she will lay down her life for me more readily than a human friend would do."

"No doubt, no doubt. She is of the sex feminine. And I take it the sex has a great deal to do with the methods. She would lay down her life, no doubt; and if you crossed her intentions she would eat you in the same earnest way of feeling. Defend me from her, and the humans that are like her."

"And all the same, there is no man to whom a woman can more confidently appeal than to Mr. Armstrong. Even such a recluse as myself can say that, with a certainty. I have heard of you; and I have long desired to meet you. Why, I will explain by-and-by if life is spared and our acquaintance prospers, as I believe it will."

"All right! Everything goes, and it's all for fun. Your cougar will be a handy thing to have in the family. If Mr. Pet Parker should happen to strike the trail again, and come wandering around while we sleep I have no doubt that she will give a good account of herself to-morrow morning, when we question her about the dear defunct."

"An' av she ates wan av us up in the noight, sure, an' he will know be mornin' how much faith to put in yer promisis. Oi don't say onny expression av her countenance that makes me would to have her guarding me bide side whin Oi am ashlaup; but av Misther Armstrong can sbtand me loss it's not Barney Kane that will object."

Barney's tone was lugubrious, and doubtless

he felt more than half what he said, but his words sounded irresistibly comical. Miss Winter, who had been listening to the conversation with a countenance that indicated more or less of dissatisfaction, broke into a ringing laugh, the heartiest, she told herself, that she had enjoyed for many a month.

And, strangely enough, Desert Alf never seemed to notice it. He turned his back to the fire, laid his head on his arm, and was silent. In five minutes he was sleeping sweetly, and Draco was stretched by his side, her muzzle resting on his shoulder, her eyes gleaming as she watched the group on the other side of the camp-fire.

CHAPTER VI.

THE TRAMP BEGINS.

WHEN Aztec Alf retired from the conversation, Mr. Armstrong held a short conference with Miss Winter. They spoke in a low tone, and what they said was of but little importance. It referred chiefly to the arrangements for the night. The young lady did attempt to whisper her disapprobation of the addition to the party, but Jack checked her, with a gesture, and a word of warning.

"Don't worry yourself about him. He is a queer one, but I will gamble on his being a man to tie to as long as you treat him square. And if we had looked the country all over we could not have struck a man I would sooner see with our outfit. He knows the desert like a book, and between us it will be hard if we don't take you through, sailing. Now, what you want to do is to get down to sleep as soon as you can. We must be out of this, and on the road, by daybreak. If you can't make yourself comfortable to-night, the best thing for you to do will be to take the back track in the morning, for it will be a palace and a king's cook alongside of what is ahead of us."

The serious advice was scarcely needed. The young lady had a fair idea of what was ahead of her, and looked forward to the balance of this night without the least apprehension. With a rubber blanket on the ground, to keep out the dampness, and a blanket wrapped around her, she fell asleep almost as quickly as the man with the cougar had done. Then Mr. Armstrong, seeing that Barney was already enjoying the reward for the labors of the day, cast a glance at the tiger. He saw her eyes glowing like twin coals, and believed that for the present she would prove all the guard needed. If Desert Alf could trust her there seemed no reason why he should not do the same. He was tired, and wanted to think matters over a little. Before he knew where he was going he drifted through the gate of dreamland, and was sleeping more or less soundly.

When Mr. Armstrong again awoke he was immediately conscious of an unwonted feeling of fullness in his head. Also, that it was daylight.

The latter discovery gave him a shock. He had lain down with the intention of taking a nap for an hour or so, and then keeping watch for the balance of the first half of the night, leaving the second half to Barney and Alf, whom he would have aroused in due time. There was something unprecedented about this. He looked around for Barney, to see what he had been doing.

Barney was sleeping also. He called to him, but received no answer. Then he rose wearily, at the same time remembering and looking around for the other occupants of the camp—or those who had been occupants when he lay down to rest.

Barney was there, and as sound asleep as he ever was in his life. Indeed, he was a little too sound asleep to have reached such a state of somnolency in a natural manner. He lay like a log, his breathing so gentle that it could scarcely be heard, or the movement of his breast be seen. As for Miss Winter, and the man with the tiger—they had vanished completely, and left no trace behind! So far as appearances went they might never have been in the camp at all; and the remembrances of the previous evening might be but parts of a troubled dream.

At that discovery Mr. Armstrong was galvanized into something that was like more than ordinary life. He aroused Barney in a great deal quicker style than that young man was accustomed to, prompt as were the ways of Gentle Jack on ordinary occasions. He came out of his slumbers with a howl; and as he rose he had his six-shooter out and ready for his assailant.

Fortunately for somebody, he recognized who that assailant was before proceeding to extremities; and also noted that the hours had flown both faster and further than he could have deemed possible while he slept.

"Bad luck to the ship that brought me over! What in swate blazis be the m'anin' av this? Sure an' it's the middle av nixt week it moight be for the fale av me. Oi have overshlit meself ontirely. An' the leddy, an' the mon, an' the tiger? They have shkript an' no mistake. Oi don't undershtand it, at all, at all."

"The same for me, Barney. Looks as though the lady might have played us for flats, and cleaned us out, on the first deal. If she and the cougar sharp haven't gone off together it's safe

to bet that the one followed the other. What were they up to? I didn't ask either of them to catch on with me, and if they wanted to leave they were welcome to go. What was the sense in drugging us? for that is the long or short of it. There was something done to us shortly after we laid down, and the two have the start of us by the whole night. When I see the gentleman with the feminine cat again I think I will have something to say to him."

"An' av we wait till ye see him again, it's not joostice ye can do to the occasion. Relave yer-sill a trifle roight now, an' ye will fale bether. An' Oi wad enjoy it meself. Av ye doubt yer tongue can mate the facts av the case, we moight look around an' say how they wint. There may be a hape av inspiration in that."

"And to think, if they could be caught, how neatly they could be hung for horse-stealing. Really, in all my born days I never was played quite so neatly. If they had just taken my six-shooters, and the coat off of my back, the job would have been complete."

The plaint of Jack had its origin in fact, and called the attention of Barney to another unpleasant feature in the case. Their horses had disappeared—taken away almost from over their noses.

That capped the climax, and the feelings of Barney were now too deep for utterance. He remained discreetly silent, watching Jack as he went over the ground around the camp, to see in which direction the fugitives had gone.

Traces to show were few and faint, and for a time Mr. Armstrong was puzzled. He found the track left by Aztec Alf and his tiger, when they entered the camp; but not the faintest mark to indicate where they went out.

And yet, at length, the sport and strike "sign" enough to satisfy him; and returning, he threw himself down on the ground once more.

By this time there was not a shadow of anger and disgust left in his face, and he quietly remarked to Kane:

"Hustle up the breakfast, old man. We have been losing time this morning after a scandalous fashion. We should have been on the road hours ago. And how lucky it was that we used our haversacks for pillows. I tell you, it would have been a dreary old day without them. We could have spent half the time in trying to shoot something for the larder, and starved to death before we got it cooked."

"Faith, an' we could have got back to Oro in half the time, an' av ye fale delicate about the town, sure it would not break our backs to foot it to Miguel's. It's the choice we have forninst us; an' glad Oi am, after all, that we're not going down into the desert wid the calico, an' the man wid the tiger."

"Poor company is sometimes better than none at all, as perhaps you will think before we get out of the wilderness again. You don't suppose a little accident like this is going to interfere with my plans when I have once laid them? We won't be bothered with our horses, and that is one comfort. Now, hurry up the provisions, such as they are. I declare, it has made me feel quite hungry talking about them."

Barney gave a groan and settled himself to his work. It was no use to argue the matter; and of course he had no intention of deserting his friend and master. The scant meal was soon ready, and discussed. Then they gathered up their belongings and pushed their way somewhat wearily to the southwest.

CHAPTER VII.

WHAT HAD HAPPENED WHILE MR. ARMSTRONG SLEPT.

THERE was certainly something remarkable about the slumber that fell on every member of the little party, and the explanation given by Armstrong, that they had been drugged, was natural enough under the circumstances. Something very like it had happened.

But connecting Desert Alf with it was altogether wrong. That individual lay down to rest in perfect good faith, and with much the same idea, about only taking a nap. He had slept with Draco's muzzle on his shoulder many a time before, when the danger was a great deal more immediate than it seemed now. If any one approached the camp, whether it was friend or foe, he was sure that the cougar would awaken him.

For once he was wrong. He slept soundly, since he was more tired than he knew. After a little he slept more soundly than was natural, were he ever so tired. Something like a spell appeared to be over all the occupants of the camp. Their breathing became less and less audible. A person stumbling upon them might have supposed that he had found a trio of dead men.

By that time the great cat began to show some uneasiness. Two or three times she raised her head; and even made a movement as though about to arise.

As often she dropped lazily back, as if the effort was too much for her. Finally, when there was the faintest of noises, made by a twig that creaked under a light footstep, though she turned her eyes in that direction, she uttered no warning growl, but suffered an intruder to steal quietly forward until he stood facing her, his eyes staring into hers.

For a moment or two the beast sustained that look, and there was even a slight nervous twitching about her lips, that showed they were just ready to part in an angry snarl. Then, the lids dropped as the duel of eyes finished in favor of the intruder. Scintillicent as those eyes were in the dark, they belonged to a man.

When this man saw that he had conquered, he gave a low but audible chuckle, extended his hand with a waving motion, as if to tell her to remain as she was, and then stooped over the embers of the fire.

With caution he added some little twigs, and fanned them into a flame. By the light thus obtained he took a view of the surroundings. His first glance was toward Desert Alf, the Aztec. When he saw that he was motionless he looked at Barney and his master. Then he shrugged his shoulders and advanced to the side of Miss Winter, who was a little apart from the others, and was the soundest sleeper of them all.

A weird, singular looking person was this man, in face, figure and costume. Though the contour of his features indicated that he was of the Anglo-Saxon race, his bronzed face and peculiar garments might have belonged to a Bedouin chief. He was not of more than medium stature, and his hands as he busied them about the firelight, showed lean and sinewy.

There was a smile of contempt around his lips as he looked down at Magdalena.

"You were looking for the King of the Camels? Foolish child! When you awake to see him it will be hard to say whether you will be more surprised or dismayed, to find that your wish has been realized. Better for you to have strangled the foolish idea when first it came into your head—if you could. You could not know who ordered it there; or that without me it would lead you to your death. With me it may lead to something almost as bad—its gratification. It is a great comfort to tell the truth sometimes—when there is no one to hear it. I will save you for the present; and the others will be looked after later on. It was not part of my plan that you should meet with such company, but even I cannot altogether control chance. The two there I have no use for. They look dangerous. If they start to find the kingdom they will go on while life lasts. Let them go their way. If they find me it will be at their peril. I might slay them now, but, to what good? By and by I will look at the other man. Yet, I can deal only with the girl at present. I shall make sure of her, at least. It is time I was back in my kingdom; and the man with the cat can be managed by other hands."

So he communed with himself. He had no fear that he would waken any one. He at once gathered the girl up on his arm, lifting her as easily as though she was a child. Perhaps, at the same time, he made a signal, since two men stepped forward from where they had been lurking, beyond the radius of the firelight. They were dressed much after the same fashion as he, though their garments were not so costly, and they were evidently below him in position—his servants.

Into their hands Magdalena was intrusted, and once receiving her they stepped away without further orders, carrying her gently between them.

When they had passed out of the faint circle of light the first comer stood for a moment, as though debating what he should do. Thoughtfully he looked at the sleepers; once he even took a step in the direction of Desert Alf. At that the cougar made a slight movement, that showed she was awake, and that if she had not yet interfered with the proceedings, it was by no means certain she would not. The chief noted the sign, and though it perhaps did not change his intentions, it made him more thoughtful and cautious.

"Humph! I can compel the men, but the brute I can only control. And it is not so certain that I can do that, through thick and thin. One day I will have the animal to experiment on, but it would not be safe to try to take her now. I am not sure how long the spell will last, and with man and beast both against me, there might be some unpleasantness before I got to the end of the entertainment. Better to draw the teeth of these other two, and leave all to their reflections when they awake. The Aztec will follow to the end, as the trail will lie before him; but the two, if they are not natural born idiots, will jump to a conclusion, and take the back track. If not—we will be ready for them. Fate is strong, but man can sometimes manage it."

He moved toward the spot where the three horses and the mule were tethered. With the skill of one used to handling such animals, he gathered them in a bunch, threw himself on the back of Armstrong's horse, and was off.

For once the mule seemed to accommodate himself to the wishes of the guide, and whether it was from any particular power of this strange personage, or because of the strong attachment it had so suddenly formed for Armstrong's steed, it moved along as if it saw unlimited corn and oats at the other end of the line.

For perhaps ten minutes after the disappearance of the intruder the status of things in the

camp remained unchanged. The men slept; the tiger was quiescent.

Then Draco made a made a movement. She raised to her feet, gave a great yawn, and looked unconcernedly around at the forms of the sleeping men.

When she yawned she made a slight noise. It was scarcely audible across the fire, but it reached the ears of her master, and aroused him from his slumbers. He opened his eyes, stretched out his hand, and when it did not rest upon his pet he softly called her by name.

She answered with a low purr, and crouched at his feet, as though conscious that she had been unfaithful.

"What is it, old girl? Something wrong? What is it you hear?"

She extended her muzzle in the direction in which the intruders had gone, and uttered a low growl.

That brought Alf to his feet. There was something more than approaching danger—the danger was already there, or passed. Whatever it was it needed investigation.

Jack Armstrong was there, and Barney was there; but where was the girl? Her absence was noted, and Alf's eyes were back on the cougar like a flash.

She was confessing her sin as plainly as possible, and showing her willingness to remedy the fault. Lightly she moved over to where the man had stood before turning away; touched her nose to the ground, and looking around over her shoulder she followed along on the trail he had made—a trail invisible to the eye, but easily distinguishable to her fine scent.

When one has studied the habits of even a brute there is wisdom to be learned from the observation. To Desert Alf the actions of the cat were almost as clear as if she had spoken. He moved along the route of his pet, looked sharply at the ground, glanced at the spot where the horses had been standing, and then went back to the side of Mr. Armstrong, who was so quiet that one could almost think him dead.

"What can be the meaning of this?" thought the man with the cougar, fairly puzzled at the strange silence. "Can they be dead?"

The low, almost inaudible breathing of the sleeper showed that he was neither dead or seriously harmed. Alf spoke.

From what he knew of Gentle Jack a word would be sufficient to arouse him. Indeed, he more than wondered why he had not already been awakened.

But, Jack made no answer to the call. His breathing was just as slow and just as regular as before; and that was all.

Then, Alf touched him; at first lightly, and afterward with a shake that was not altogether gentle.

He might as well have tried to waken the dead.

There was no sign of anything abnormal save this strange lethargy, and when a light was held to Armstrong's eyes they winced a little, like those of a sound sleeper might do. Another man might have been tempted to renew his efforts, but the Aztec shook his head, and muttered:

"It is not worth the while. He could tell me nothing; and I have my doubts if I could bring him to his senses until the King of the Camels chose to allow it. Whom he puts to sleep, sleep soundly, indeed. I can tell his handiwork as well as if I had seen him. You have not done so badly, Draco. To have made any sign would perhaps have put us all in deadly danger. As it is, there is a chance to track him to his lair. Come! There is nothing to be made by lingering here. We will follow while the scent is warm. We will know whether the girl is his tool or his victim."

The tiger recognized the friendliness of his tone, and that her seeming negligence had been pardoned. She frisked lightly around her master, who hesitated a moment, by the fire; and then followed him demurely as he strode away from the spot.

This was why Jack Armstrong, when he awoke, found that he and Barney were alone in the camp.

CHAPTER VIII.

"THE KING OF THE CAMELS."

MISS WINTER was as deeply affected as any of the others, and she did not open her eyes until long after Gentle Jack had discovered her absence. At first she had almost forgotten the events of the preceding day; and was even oblivious to her surroundings. The couch on which she reclined was somewhat softer than that on which she had lain down to rest, but her covering was the same, and she could feel that the ground was beneath her. The remembrance of her newly made comrades came drifting back, and she opened her eyes and looked around, expecting to see Mr. Armstrong's pleasant face, or to hear the rich brogue of the genial little Irishman.

What she saw was a shock and a revelation. She was no longer in the little dingle. Mr. Armstrong and the rest had vanished, and in their place had come stranger in the garb of the Orient, and a scene that might be a section of Arabia.

As when she laid down, she was reclining under the shadow of a tree; but before her stretched a desert as desolate as any that she had ever yet conceived of. Near by, several camels were kneeling, waiting for their burdens, which three or four darkly bronzed men were placing upon their backs. Very fierce and warlike did these fellows look, though they silently went about their work, never once looking in the direction of Magdalena.

At her side there was another like to them, though with the air of a leader about him; who was looking down at her, a strange smile parting his thin lips.

"So you deign to awaken?" he asked, as she looked up at him. "I have known before of persons who were conveniently deaf and dumb, though they never lost the consciousness of what was going on around them. But I really believe there was no sham about this. You were as senseless as you seemed."

No answer to this. Of course, Magdalena knew that she had discovered the object of her search; but for the moment she looked as blank as though that search had just come to an unsuccessful ending.

"Nothing to say, eh? Why, I supposed you would be overjoyed to see me! Of course I knew of your quest, almost as soon as you had decided on it, and determined to meet you halfway—or as near to that as I dared, or cared, to go. There were some hardships before you, that you expected to encounter, and it must be a pleasant surprise to know that their prospect has vanished. Under such guidance, and with such an escort you will be as safe as if you were at home. Are you ready for your breakfast?"

"But—but, how came I here? Where are my friends? What has happened to them, and to me?"

She found her tongue, and spoke the first words that came to her lips, without having much idea that they would receive any answer. When she paused it was because she had recovered the control of her nerves, and understood the folly of what she was saying. The man answered, with a smile that disclosed a double row of sharp, white teeth:

"I have happened to you. As to the friends that you speak of, I know nothing about them. They were not here when I came, and they have left no traces behind them. When you see them again you may give them my compliments, and say that it was perhaps as well for them that they did not see me face to face. I am not fond of finding intruders in my kingdom, and have a way of warning them off that is apt to be considered unpleasant. Of course, I refer to intruders of the masculine sex. I am always glad to welcome the ladies. Indeed, I am apt to be so fascinated with their presence that I do not care to have them leave me. When you have seen more of my kingdom, and the inside of my palace, you will understand me better. You can have had no difficulty in making out just who I am?"

"No," answered Magdalena, slowly. "For one who has heard of you it is not hard to recognize you at the first glance. But I warn you that if I am admitted into your palace I may turn out to be an undesirable visitor. I wish to be honest with you, and give the warning at once, and for all it is worth. If it seems at any time that I have forgotten it, you accept that belief at your own risk. I shall never repeat it; and you will never have the right to accuse me of having gained an entrance to your arcanum through fraud or deceit. As your prisoner, I am at your mercy, and must follow as you command. As your guest, you accept me with that warning plainly given. I am in your hands; let me know what it is that you command me to do, or what I may expect."

"I admire frankness in others, probably because I have so little to do with it myself. Thanks for your warning. I think that I will be able to take care of myself. I have no orders, but I would suggest that as you are about to start on a journey which will be uninterrupted for some time, it might be as well for you to pay some attention to the breakfast I am about to set before you. If your peculiar situation has affected your appetite I am sorry for you, and will wager that you find it vigorous enough before you are invited to the table again."

He clapped his hands and a servant stepped forward, bearing a tray on which was arranged the breakfast spoken of. It was a rather simple repast, and decidedly of an Oriental nature—fruit, coffee and cakes forming its principal portion.

Magdalena did not reject it. She was willing to accept the words of the King of the Camels as truth; and in spite of all the mystery in regard to her strange surroundings she was cool enough to provide for the future, even if she had lost her appetite—which she certainly had not. She motioned to the ground by her side, and when the tray was set there, fell to work with a vigor that soon cleared it of its contents. Her captor stood by her side watching the performance. Evidently he was finding his guest a woman to his mind, and it was his desire to treat her with the semblance of respect that at first he had not felt.

When she had finished with the viands set be-

fore her he again clapped his hands, and the same servant came forward once more to remove the tray. As he gathered up the things the "king" said something to him in a language that was entirely unfamiliar to Miss Magdalena. The answer was given in the same strange tongue; and no doubt he repeated the message to some of his fellows, who had been loading the camels. They turned their faces toward their master and bowed obsequiously, at the same time motioning toward the patient camels, which still knelt on the ground, awaiting the completion of their load.

"Now, Miss Winter," said the chief, offering his arm with a grace that was courtly in the extreme, "we are ready to move. If you will allow me I will escort you to your saddle. I know that you are a finished equestrienne, but suppose that you are unacquainted with the gait of the animal you are about to mount. I would caution you to be on your guard a little, until you get accustomed to its mode of progression."

Silently Magdalena rose to her feet, and without noticing the offered arm followed the man to the side of the nearest camel. It was but lightly loaded, and there was room for her in the odd, clumsy-looking saddle, in which she placed herself without the least hesitation. Then the chief mounted the camel next in line; two other men took charge of the remaining animals, while two or three more of the nomads remained standing in an attitude of respectful attention while they received their orders, still in that unknown tongue.

Finally, when the last word had been spoken, a signal was given, the camels stumbled awkwardly to their feet, turned their faces toward the heart of the desert, and started away with a lumbering, awkward shamble, that nevertheless was carrying them quite fleetly over the ground. Whether the method of finding it was pleasing or not, Miss Magdalena was in a fair way to see the habitation of the man who had received the sobriquet of "The King of the Camels."

CHAPTER IX.

THE ROCK IN THE DESERT.

MR. ARMSTRONG was very gentle; but he was very obstinate. When he started to follow a trail, or what he thought was a trail, there was never any question with him about stopping until he got to the other end.

It was pretty much the same way with Barney Kane. Though he might give vent to an occasional grumble, there was not the least danger that he would cry quits until his employer said that it was time to stop. To be sure, he had not as much faith in the existence of the man whom the reader has seen mentioned as the King of the Camels; and even if he could be found Mr. Kane could not understand the exact profit that was to be derived from the interview. But, as long as Jack said, advance, Barney never once would think of going backward.

They plodded along in fair spirits during the day following the strange disappearances of the night. It was somewhat wearisome, but there were no remarks made in regard to that feature of the journey. It was also terribly lonesome. From daylight to dark they did not see a human creature; and scarcely a thing that breathed. The few traces which they followed indicated that the Aztec was in front of them. At least, they now and then could see footprints that had belonged to a man, or a tiger. They never met with the two together; and as yet there was nothing to show that they were of any more recent date than the first ones that were seen.

Just a little before sundown Mr. Armstrong stopped suddenly. If he had been a man given to such manifestations he would have uttered an exclamation of surprise, and perhaps one of delight. On the plain before them was a strange track. Looking further he saw a number like it. He pointed.

"There you are, Barney. We have struck the trail, for sure."

"An' be the same towkin, it looks as though the mon wid the big cat wor nigh, or nighabouts. It's their thracks Oi say to wan soide."

"Correct, as usual. You always know when to look further. From the lay of the land I am not so sure that getting on the track is going to do us much good. If we had our horses it would not be so safe to risk it, and on foot there is a pretty strong possibility that we will leave our bones in the desert."

Actually, it seemed as though Mr. Armstrong was going to be depondent, just as he was getting what he had professed to be yearning for.

"Thru for yez," answered Barney, in a consolatory tone. "But av ye observe, the mon wid the tiger stopped whin he shtruck the trail. It moight not do to folly the camels on foot, through the desert; but av ye could surround him? Ehl There, now. What's the matther wid that? Av it ain't the game Misther Atzec is troyin' Oi don't know banes. Say there! It's off to wan side he goes, an' 'tis on fut that he is, himself. Sure, an' we kin go as far in the day, or the noight, ayther. An' av he don't know where the wather is to be found, it's the tiger that can foind that silf same. Folly him,

Misther Armstrong, an' it's all roight we will be—or there will be some wan ilse d'id besides Misther Armstrong an' his humble fri'nd."

"Those lips of yours can drop pearls and rubies, on occasion. I was thinking of that very thing. Alf knows as much about the desert as any man, and if he turns aside he must have his reason for it—always provided he is trying to follow this outfit. I am not so certain of that; but I'll run the chances of it. Off we go on the new direction." Perhaps my eyes deceive me, but it seems to me that I can see something in the distance that may be a castle, or only a rock. And then, again, it may be the heel of a mountain chain. If it is a rock I will venture to say that I know something about where I am. I have heard some strange stories of these regions, from men who did not care to speak of them much above a whisper. I had a friend once who crossed what may have been this very stretch of desert. He had some friends who didn't cross it. They only got somewhere about half-way. If we come on their bones I suppose we won't be particularly discouraged?"

The remark was made after the manner of a question, and with an innocence that Barney recognized as belonging to Jack only in his most serious moments. It was a bid for an opinion; perhaps for advice. Perhaps this would be the last opportunity for Barney to withdraw from what even he could recognize as something more dangerous than the average wild-goose chase.

"Ontil the canteens are quoite exhaustid, and there sames no chance at all, at all to foind wather, it's not Barney Kane will think av discouragemint. An' av there's bones on the disert, sure, it's bones that Oi've sane in the city, an' they niver scared me; whoy wad they make me knayes wake out here? Av any mon crossed, it's Mister Armstrong can do that same thing."

"Thanks, old man. Somehow, I felt that I ought not allow you to follow me without telling you how the land might lay ahead. I didn't doubt for a moment what your answer would be, but I had to ease my conscience. Now that it is off of my mind we will forge ahead. It's a long march before us, but there is still a little water left; and if we can reach yonder point I fancy that the worst of the journey is over. What we will find, if we once get to the other end, is something else. You can be sure we won't receive the most cordial reception in the world when we dawn in on the gentleman who keeps the camels."

"An' ye belave, widout doubt, that there is such a mon? Oi have heard av him, but the stories wor so woid that Oi niver took much stock in thim ontill Oi heard ye sp'ake av thim yersilf. An' thim there's the thracks forninst us. Sure, it's quare to foind the oogly b'astes here. Wan moight think himsilf in Aygipt. Where did the jintleman get thim?"

"Don't wonder that it is a hard yarn to swallow; but the camels are the easiest part to account for. Some time before the war the Government started a herd, to be used in explorations in the heaven-forsaken country that had to be tackled in the interest of science—and the men who drew their wages for doing it. Also, for use in military operations, and for transporting supplies over the desert. That same war gave plenty of employment in another field to these explorers, and the camels went to waste—or to the waste places. There was quite a herd of them running wild on the Gila; and this man that rejoices in the appellation of king captured some of them, and has been utilizing them in going to and from his retreat. I, too, never more than half believed the story myself; but now, with those tracks in front of me, I swallow that, and all the rest. The thing is decided, then. Here goes for a long pull, a strong pull, and a pull all together, to find the headquarters of the King of the Camels. You have always had a fair percentage of the profits that came from our little expeditions. This time I promise you, if it all pans out as I hope it will, we will have a little more than usual to divide, and your share will be something worth the getting. As yet I have few plans, but they generally arrange themselves in due course of time. When I see my way clear I will let you know what it is all likely to amount to. Now, if we want to save our precious lives we must be on the move. It won't do to be resting too long at one place."

While he was talking Gentle Jack was using his eyes to the best advantage, and by this time had his line of march fully marked out. There was nothing to be gained by delay, having once made up his mind; and so he dropped in on the trail of the man with the tiger, and trudged obstinately along, with his henchman at his heels.

"About what toime did ye think we will r'ache the spot?" asked Kane, after a silence of what might have been at least half an hour.

"It's doie dog or ate the hatchet; but it moight make me mind a bit aizier av Oi knew there wor a chance for a snooze befour mornin'. An' a dhrink av wather; is it loike there will be a chance for wan to fill hissilf up to the tongue? For wance it sames as av Oi wad sooner be stuffed wid wather than whisky."

"Don't be excited, Barney. You won't

perish with thirst for twenty-four hours yet; and before that time is up I hope we will strike that self-same point that we have our faces set for. Of course, as I have never been there myself, I cannot say exactly what the place really is, but if we find things as I think we will, there will be no trouble as to what we shall drink; and for eating, there is still something left in our haversacks. We must hold on to the Winchester, though. The man with the cougar may give us some trouble; and there is no telling who else we may find there, or how hard we may have to fight to get our noses into the drink."

"Sure, an' av it's ownly foightin' at the ind, Oi don't care how soon we get there. We can howl our own at that onny day."

"That's the true spirit, Barney. Keep your courage up, and we will have lots of fun before we get through with it. And don't forget that there is a lady in the case. It begins to look as though she had not absconded with Desert Alf, after all. And if she didn't it is safe to bet that the King of the Camels has got his fingers on her. I expected to have no end of trouble the minute I laid eyes on her, and now I know it."

"Thin ye haven't given her up! Good luck to yel Oi didn't think ye would, aven av appear-incis wor aginst her. She moight have been more fray wid her confidincis; but it's fri'nds she will be nadein', bad enough, an' whin ye gits the throe inwardness av her sthory, it's adventure enough there will be to folly it up."

With some such conversation the two men beguiled the way, which was long enough, however their minds might be diverted. At times they plodded on in silence, that not even the natural light-heartedness of the two could induce them to break.

Night dropped upon them before they had made any apparent progress; but Jack had already taken his direction, and now held his course by the stars. Hour after hour they won their way onward, until the hour of midnight had been long passed. In the uncertain light it was hard to see what progress they were making, but Armstrong began to keep his ears open, and his wits about him.

After the manner of their leave-taking it was very likely that neither Desert Alf nor his cat would be pleased at seeing them again; and he expected that, if they were on their trail, as he was almost certain, and there was no mistake about the landmark that was visible at sundown, the two would be apt to be found resting at the very spot he expected to camp in the early hours of the morning. A certain amount of time had no doubt been lost in tracking the camel-riders to the point where the two trails diverged, and that would so far reduce the lead held at first that if he rested at all, Desert Alf would be apt to allow the sport and his man to overtake him.

As he had been puzzling his wits all day over an explanation of what had happened, without coming to a definite conclusion, Armstrong thought that whether the meeting was to be one for peace or war he would like to have it come off. He was figuring up in his mind what the profits would be if it turned out that the cougar-tamer had a reasonable excuse for his desertion, when he was aroused from his reverie by the sound of a shot, followed by yells that were most certainly from the throats of at least half a dozen Indian braves. There was work immediately in front, and Armstrong pushed rapidly ahead, to get into the thick of it as soon as possible.

CHAPTER X.

DESERT ALF HOLDS THE FORT.

It did not prove a very hard task for Mr. Armstrong to find the thick of the *melee*, which had so suddenly started in front of him. It seemed strange indeed that he did not see the flash of that first shot since it was fired at no great distance. As though it had been a signal, dark forms started up on the plain, and surged forward toward a central point, and the air was burdened with the yells uttered by half a score of bronzed throats.

Mr. Armstrong had heard just such yells before, and recognized them at once. It was a gang of Indians charging in on a white man, or a white man's camp. When he heard the yells answered by a fierce cry, that had nothing human in it, he knew that he had caught up at last with the man with the tiger, and that if he wanted to interview him again in this world he would have to do something, and that right speedily. Desert Alf might be an army in himself, but he could hardly be expected to cope successfully with the overwhelming odds that were closing in on him.

The worst of it was that there could be no long range firing. If the bullets of Gentle Jack were allowed to fly at random in the dark it was pretty certain that they would do more damage than good; for in such cases lead always seemed to be attracted in the wrong direction. Aztec Alf was at work, however, firing right and left, without the least idea that help was so near. But for that fact Armstrong would have come, as silently as he could, with the intention of waking them up in fine style

when he got within range. It was to give the other man a warning that hes houted:

"Let her go, Alfred! I'll be with you long time before morning, and together we'll mop the plain up with them. Here's at 'em, if it takes a wheel off!"

Then, being close enough to be certain of his aim, Jack opened fire and tumbled an Indian over with each of his two first shots. Meantime, Barney raised a regular Irish bullabaloo, and fired in the direction where he thought he could do the most good. As he was a marksman of but little less prowess than his employer, his shots were not wasted, either.

The diversion came in the nick of time, when Aztec Alf was surrounded with a cordon of foes, the line of which was getting thicker every moment. Though he could have given a good account of himself, and Draco would have died trying to make her teeth meet, it is more than likely that numbers would have told, and that the man with a tiger would have gone down before long under the determined attack. At the shout and shots from the rear there was a scattering in hasty flight, the horsemen wheeling their ponies to one side and the other, and darting away to be out of harm's reach, while they found out who was this unexpected enemy who assailed them.

At that, Aztec Alf's voice was heard for the first time.

"Good for you, Armstrong. I have been looking for you to turn up on the trail. This way. They are too strong for us. A minute more and they will be back on us. Here you are. Follow me, and I can put all hands in safety, or where we can hold them off until they will be too sick!"

As he spoke, Alf darted toward the two, and by his side came the cougar, that, in spite of the wild cry for blood it had given, kept by him like a well-trained dog.

Mr. Armstrong knew little of the lay of the ground; and he was glad to submit to the guidance of one that did. He met the man with the cat more than half way.

"We can fight it out, back to back, and give them all they want right here; but I'm mighty much afraid that there would be no getting away if they circled us. I am not ready for the corral yet; and if you know any way to shoot the ripple, now that I have had a chance to fire I am willing to fall back. Have it to suit yourself."

While he talked he was following the lead of Alf, who had turned again, and was making his way toward the dark object, that now loomed up from no great distance. At a glance Armstrong saw that it was, as he had hoped, an immense rock, which stood in the bare plain, alone and as though hewn out by the hand of man into the semblance of a castle.

The red-skins saw the movement to retreat, and uttered a yell of triumph. They knew the force they had to deal with, and believed it would be an easy victory for them if they pressed the attack at once. There were answering yells from more of the tribe in the distance, and those nearest were seized with an ambition to have the matter over and done with before their brethren arrived. They came pounding down upon the three whites with an utter recklessness, shooting as they came.

Fortunately the red-men were not experts with their weapons—after nightfall, at least. There was some very close work, but the white men ran on unhurt, until, all together, they darted into the shadow of the rock, a few yards ahead of their pursuers.

"There is a spring," whispered Desert Alf, as he hastily wheeled, his revolvers going up for work.

"Fill them while I hold the reds off. Then we will go up higher, and show them a thing or two that they haven't thought of."

The advice was too good not to be minded. Without trouble Jack discovered the spring, and hastily replenished their almost empty canteens. Although bullets and arrows were pattering around them neither winced, hesitated, nor were tempted to leave the work in hand until it was finished. Then they looked up, to see what room there was for them to take a hand again in the controversy; and found that for the present it was over. Aztec Alf had weapons that he knew well how to use. Stretched out motionless on the plain or moving feebly in an effort to drag away from the dangerous neighborhood, were three or four dark heaps, while the balance of the raiders were shooting out of harm's way as fast as their wiry little steeds could carry them.

"Good enough for the present," muttered Alf, turning to Jack, and recharging the revolvers that he had just emptied.

"We can take our time to it now. They won't be back on the attack again for half an hour; and half a minute will be enough to put us where they can't reach us. Lucky for me that you turned up to chip in just when you did. They were too strong for me, and had got in between me and the rock. As long as they knew it was only one man they had to contend with they would be brave as you please, and numbers will tell. Thanks, old man. When I find you in such a pickle I will do the same for you. Here's your stairway; we must march ourselves up to the top of the castle."

The two followed him without the least hesitation. In the presence of a common enemy there was a farewell to doubts and suspicions. There was a narrow, precipitous stairway before them, evidently built by the hand of nature. One man could hold it against a score, as Jack saw at a glance. Indeed, he was not so sure that they would be able to scale it, as it looked upward at the dark line stretching above him, for a hundred feet or more. If Alf had not spoken after the manner of a man who knew what he talked of he might have thought that they had approached it from the wrong side; and that the avenue by which it might be ascended was somewhere else.

But all was quiet behind them, and they were able to scramble up at their leisure. After a hard climb they came out into the starlight once more, and found themselves on a broad surface of rock that was almost as level as a floor.

Led by the Aztec the three crept cautiously forward to the edge of the rock and looked downward. The perpendicular face below them cast but little shadow, so that they could see almost to the foot of the wall. From where they were posted they could command the spring, and the approach to the stairway.

"Here we are. Did you ever see a better place to hold them off? With Draco at the bottom to give notice when they approach there is no reason why we should not be good for the whole tribe, if the provisions hold out. And they ought to last longer than the reds can stand it without water. You see, if they get desperate, we can just pile them up in a solid wall around that water without much danger to ourselves. They may fire at our flashes, but the chances are a thousand to one that they always miss."

"It looks like it," answered Armstrong, taking a careful look over.

"But don't forget that if there are any chances at all they are always even. They can or they can't. That's the rule in sport, and the rest all depends on how your luck is running, compared with that of the other fellows. Looks to me as though we had a sure enough thing of it, and I would be willing to put up my ducats accordingly. And now for about an inch of good, square talk. How did it come that you left Barney and me in the lurch; and what do you know about the young lady who shared our camp with us? I guess I have the idea reached, but I want a word or two of explanation to make it sure."

The question was one that Alf was willing enough to answer. In a few words he explained the way he found things in the camp when he awoke, and gave a pretty close guess at what had happened previously. He told how he had tried to awaken Mr. Armstrong, and how he had left him spellbound from, as he believed, the mysterious influence of the King of the Camels. After events seemed to justify him in the belief that he then formed. No doubt was there in his mind that the young lady of whom he knew nothing positively, had been abducted by that strange man, who had been able to fascinate or hypnotize Draco, and who, if he had so chosen, might have slaughtered them all, for all the resistance that would have been made.

"Queer sort of a fish he must be," said Jack after a moment of thought. "What puzzles me is to know how he got on to us, or thought it worth while to interfere. If the young lady was to be believed there was no one acquainted with her purposes. And at least she told me that she had revealed them to no one. And, I swear, if there was no one knew more about them than I did they are all mystery, even yet. I had a sort of suspicion that she was deceiving me, or even that there might be some sort of an understanding between you and her. I would have believed it sure, if the horses had not been gone; but I never heard that you indulged in such vanities, and thought you had too much good sense to leave me behind alive. Now, what's the situation? This is all very pleasant and comfortable up here, as long as we are in no hurry to leave, and the gentlemen out on the plain don't get aggressive. But while we are perched up here I can't see that we are making much progress in getting even with the man that stole my horses. What do you think is the outlook? Will we get out of this in time to follow the trail?"

"There is no hurry to follow the trail. A week from now it will be just as plain to my eyes as it is now, since I know whither it leads. We cannot go as he goes. Once I tried it, and it was a miracle that I was spared to come back. Since then I have found this spot, which makes a way-station to his kingdom, which else could not be reached save as he reaches it. I knew well enough that there was danger of striking the Apaches here, but that was the risk that was to be run, or the hope of finding his retreat altogether given up.

"Don't say that last, pard. Sooner than miss, when I had once made up my mind, I would go buy out a menagerie, and start a herd of camels myself. I have been frolicking along on the trail, so far; but after this it is going to be sober, solid business with me."

"Glad to hear it. We can work together, since, as long as you are not his man, it is im-

possible that our interests should clash. It is not wealth that I am after—what I am interested in can by no manner of means be of any account to you, so that while I am serving myself I can be serving you just as well. We can make the trip together. As to the red-skins—let them howl down there. If they come up to the scratch, we can dispose of them fast enough; and if they try a siege they will not be able to stand it themselves for more than a day. We can command the only water within fifty miles, and they will have to light out on account of their ponies, if for no other reason. If they don't furnish reason enough, I will try my hand at a little argument. Backed by you I have no fear that they will not be open to reason. I have handled too many of them alone to have much fears of them when I have such backing as Mr. Armstrong."

Gentle Jack nodded slightly at the implied compliment, though he was rather inclined to receive it as a matter of course. If Aztec Alf had ever heard of him at all, there was no doubt in Jack's mind as to the nature of the information he had received.

"You can have me with you all around. I have nothing on my mind now except this trip, and there is no hurry about getting back. I need a bit of rest, and if you can guarantee that we won't die of starvation, I would just as soon sit up on this rock a week or so as not. And after that I can spare a year or two to hunting up the man who stole my horses. I suspect that it was the gent who has the kingdom down in the desert, and I will try him first; but if it should turn out that I have been doing him an injustice, I am willing to apologize, and go on further. Oh, I tell you, when I do start in on a scent I am just old business. And if they don't stand from under, our friends with their red faces will be apt to think so. Hark! There is something going on there now. They are coming for us, I do believe. What's the orders for the night?"

CHAPTER XI.

ZILLAH.

WHILE Mr. Armstrong and Barney had been plodding along rather wearily, and risking their lives a little more with every step they took, Miss Winter was pursuing her journey quite at her ease. At least she was being carried on at a rapid rate in the direction that she wished to go; and save for a shaking up, that soon was almost unnoticed, she was reasonably comfortable. There was a terrible sameness in the bare, burnt landscape, and the silence was only broken by the sound of the falling footsteps of the camels as they forged ahead at an awkward but tireless trot.

During the day but one halt was made, and that only to allow the little party to partake of some refreshment. Not much was said to her, then; and for the rest of the time the leader of the caravan was silent, though he looked at her now and then in a strange sort of way, as if he divined her thoughts, and they furnished him considerable amusement.

Far into the night they rode, without ever once striking water, or any green thing save the cacti that flourished here and there after a fashion that was wonderful, since it seemed to be in spite of nature itself.

When the halt at last came Miss Magdalena had an idea that it was more for her comfort than for any desire on the part of the rest. She was hungry and tired, and the King of the Camels was looking out for her comfort and welfare as well as he could.

"There will be a chance for a couple of hours' sleep here," he said, approaching her kneeling camel. "I must not forget that you are unaccustomed to our way of traveling, and that you are more fragile than the ruffians I have seen taking the journey heretofore."

"You carry a looking-glass, then?" asked the young lady, with a lifting of the eye-brows, that would have been significant if it had not been lost in the darkness.

"Thank you for the compliment. Perhaps I am not quite as great a ruffian as I look. Of that you will be better qualified to judge later on. Meantime I shall be as hospitable as the circumstances admit of, and perhaps I can succeed in removing the bad impression that I see you have formed."

After that there was no further attempt at conversation on the part of the King of the Camels, though Magdalena did not suffer on that account. In silence she partook of the repast that was offered her, strolled around the camp, looked hopelessly over the plain that was dimly seen in the starlight, and finally lay down to her slumbers as unconcerned as though she were alone.

Tired as she was, Miss Winter did not feel at all inclined to sleep, and for some time reclined with her eyes wide open. She was conscious that she was being steadily watched by the man who sat some yards away, smoking a long-stemmed hookah, but she did not mind it, and after a time the scarcely audible gurgle and bubble seemed to have a soothing effect on her nerves. She closed her eyes, and gently dropped to sleep.

The blank that followed was utter, and dream-

less. When she awoke it was to silence and semi-darkness, and she looked around her in a half-scared way, almost believing that she had been deserted.

The very idea that such a thing might be was enough to unstring the nerves of an ordinary woman. Beyond the range of help, and without provision for an hour, it would mean certain and agonizing death.

What she did discover was almost as bad. She was alone; but not on the desert. The desolate wilds had disappeared, and she was within a building once more. Within a little alcove near by a lamp was burning dimly, its light struggling out faintly between a pair of slightly drawn curtains. How large the room was in which she was lying she could not see, but it had the indefinable feeling of great extent. She peered around her, but two sides of the apartment were curtained in the darkness. Those at the head and left of her bed were dimly visible, and she could both see and feel that they were covered with silken hangings, while a heavy carpet covered the floor.

She slid softly from the couch on which she had been resting, glided to the alcove, and finding that the lamp was burning low, threw back the curtains, and turned up the wick, so that the blaze was at its highest.

After that there was no longer any room for belief that she was dreaming. She was in a building of some kind, that was furnished with a richness that was more bewildering than a dream, and the mystery of how she had reached it was enough to turn an ordinary brain. Doubtless she had been conveyed thither in her sleep; but why was it that she had slept so soundly, and how long had it taken to effect the transfer? Scarcely so long as she thought, yet it would have been food for wonder if she had known how long she had really been in the seeming trance during which she had been brought thither.

The lamp in the alcove was fixed in its place, but by moving the curtains back as widely as possible there was sufficient light to enable her to explore the room in which she had been sleeping, though the shadows lurked heavily in the further end. If the edifice in which she found herself was to be judged by this room it was a large one, and fitted up luxuriantly. The soft, heavy carpet gave forth no sound under her tread, the walls were richly hung with tapestries, and the furniture was heavy, and of the finest description. Near the head of her bed she saw some clothes flung over a chair, and she would not have been a true woman if she had not examined to see what they were like.

She found a dress in the Turkish style, or rather a full suit, that was evidently intended for her wearing. It fitted, or looked as though it would fit, as well as if made for her. Of course she did not believe that these things were made expressly for her use, but they had evidently never been worn. It would have been in a piece with the other happenings of the last few days if it had been prepared in anticipation of her coming. It was richly made, and when she went into the alcove and hastily tried it on, she found that it fitted her to a charm. She saw her reflection in a large looking-glass, and was pleased.

As it was becoming to her she left it on, and went out into the main room once more, quite a different person in appearance.

By this time she began to feel the claims of appetite, and thought that if it was possible they had better be acknowledged. As an experiment she clapped her hands together sharply three times, and then waited.

The summons served her purpose. A wide door in one side of the wall opened, letting in a flood of light, and in its radiance a girl glided into the room.

The new-comer had a dark, Indian face, that was full of life and wild beauty. If she was a servant, the spirit in her had not been crushed, and from the bright sparkle in her black eyes it seemed likely that it was hardly yet subdued. Nevertheless, she understood her position, since she made an obeisance with true Eastern humility, and then stood silently awaiting whatever orders might be given her.

The presence of this serving-maid brought another change to the face of Magdalena. Calm, dignified, and with the air of one who was accustomed to command, she looked the girl over quietly, and then said, in a tone that was not unkindly:

"Bring me food. I suppose it is not intended that I should starve in this gilded prison. And tell me, what are the limits of my range? It is not likely that I will go beyond them. I suspect that it would be of little use to try."

Again the salaam. Then the bronze-faced girl answered in a voice that had a foreign intonation, but which dealt well enough with the English language:

"I am Zillah; and thy handmaiden. Whatever thou needest is thine if I can obtain it for thee. Whatever thou mayest ask will be answered truly, if Zillah knows. On foot, thou canst wander according to thy will. Not far canst thou go without bringing death to thyself. The doors are all open, and I will teach thee to find them and their fastenings any time by day-

light when they are closed. Go forth as it seems good. For the present thou art safe from every harm."

"And breakfast, Zillah; or dinner; or supper; or whatever it may be? Will that come at my bidding? I am no cannibal, but I will pledge you my word that it may be dangerous to keep me in this famishing condition much longer."

"Thy words were heard so soon as spoken, and whatever it is good for thee to eat will soon be at hand. It seems as though I hear it coming even now."

There was the sound of smoothly running wheels and the slight noise made by an opening door. Then a table appeared, rising through the floor. The spot had been covered by a rug, which was turned aside by the door that opened beneath it. There was nothing particularly unique about the arrangement, save its unexpectedness. Magdalena took it all as a matter of course, and looked calmly at the dainties that were on the table before her.

"Quite like the work of witches," she said; and then fell to.

Having fasted so long her appetite was sharply set, and she did ample justice to the meal. When she had finished she tested the matter more fully by again waving her hand.

The table and dishes disappeared as silently as they had arisen; and that, too, without a word being spoken by either herself or the serving-maid, who did not even turn her head aside to watch the vanishing remnants of the feast.

For a moment or two she sat in silence, waiting to see if there would be any cautions, warnings, or bits of information as to why she was there, or what she might expect.

Nothing of the kind came. Zillah stood still in her respectful attitude, awaiting her orders; and in the room, and, as far as she could hear, around it, there was the most complete silence. She might as well have been buried for all the connection there was with the outside world. It was an invitation to go out of this strange place; and to see the surroundings that were, no doubt, still stranger. She could now believe that all the things heard of this kingdom in or beyond the desert were true; and that, in addition, not half the truth had been told. Since the journey thither, the commencement of which only she had seen, she could well believe that there was slender chance for her to escape from the spot alive, unless by the grace of the man who was called its king; but for all that she had not lost her courage, or the hope that she would one day return to the regions left behind her.

"And if that young man is in earnest, and is still living, it may be that he will find some way to solve the riddle of the road to the hidden kingdom. With him to aid me the end might not be the one that the chief seems so confidently to expect. For the present I will try to gather knowledge. When the time comes that it is available I think I will have both the wit and the wisdom to use it, however much this barbarian may affect to despise a woman. Something may be made of Zillah—how much, it will not take me long to find out."

She turned again to the girl and was about to speak. Zillah had been standing with downcast eyes, and it did not seem that she had noted the wandering glances of the prisoner—how then she could divine her thoughts was every whit as mysterious as the appearance of the meal a short time before.

Yet it was done. Quietly the girl turned away and crossed the floor, making a motion for Magdalena to follow her.

That checked the words that were on the tongue of Miss Winter. It looked as though her thoughts had been read to some purpose when Zillah raised a curtain that lay close to the opposite wall, and pressed the palm of her open hand against the wall.

At that a hidden door swung open before them, revealing a corridor brilliantly lighted, and spread with a matting that turned out to be almost as soft as carpeting under their feet as they glided along the hall.

At the further end Zillah again pressed the palm of her hand against the wall. Once more an unseen door opened before them; and beyond was daylight and the open world.

The scene before Magdalena was a strange one, though not altogether unexpected. It was as though she had been transported to an oasis in an African, or an Arabian desert, that was overlooked by some old temple.

She stood on a wide porch of stone, the roof of which was supported by columns of the same material. A dozen broad steps led up to it, and they looked as though they might have been laid a thousand years. From their base a plain stretched away for a mile or more, green with grass and trees. Beyond that the line of the desert showed brown and barren. There was not a rock in sight—nor was there any surface indication of a possible quarry, when, afterwards, she had viewed the adjacent country from the other sides of the building. How the building ever came there was a mystery that at first seemed without solution.

Down on the plain, in an open space that was evidently a drill yard, a small company of

horsemen, dressed in the garb to which she was becoming accustomed, were exercising after the fantastic fashion of a band of Bedouins, every movement being directed by their leader, who rode as dashing as any of them, and who governed them, not by word or bugle-call, but by a motion of the hand. To one side, a little out of the range of these movements, was a group of half a dozen camels, lazily watched over by a lad, who looked as foreign as any of them. Here and there, on the plain, were wandering horses, going about at their own sweet will, totally uncared for.

While she looked wonderingly at this, a light shadow fell along the porch, in front of her; and looking up she found herself face to face with a woman, whose appearance was more startling than anything else that she had yet seen.

CHAPTER XII.

VASHTI.

THE woman approached Magdalena with a smooth, gliding motion that was perfectly noiseless. Where she came from was not so sure, unless it was up through the great stone steps.

Her face was a dead white. It looked almost as though it had been cut out of marble; and the eyes that stared out from under the faintly lined brows might have been painted there in a dull black, and then splashed with a faint pink. Her lips were straight and thin, and with so little tinge of color that they were hardly to be distinguished. Her form was rather above the medium height, and so flowing and graceful in its outlines, that Magdalena could almost have forgiven the weird face above it could she have seen it divested of the terrible drapery that partially hid the tight-fitting tunic in which she was dressed.

But that drapery—she was festooned with snakes, that hung writhing around her, darting out their venomous-looking tongues, and hissing savagely the moment Magdalena turned her gaze upon them.

It was enough to make a stranger fall back in terror, even if he was a strong-nerved man; and it would have been no shame to Miss Winter if she had shown surprise or horror at the sight. Perhaps something of the kind was looked for.

Nothing of the kind. Magdalena quietly raised her hand, the palm outward, to check her approach, as she calmly spoke.

"No nearer, if you please. There may be danger lurking behind those forked tongues, and I prefer to know your intentions before I trust you to keep your pets in check. Who are you?"

"I am Vashti," answered the woman, in slow, even words.

"I am the queen of the snakes. They are my born subjects, and do my bidding more loyally than ever human would. If I say kill, they kill. When I bid them be at peace they are still. If I told this one to strike, there is naught on earth could save you. See?"

She spoke slowly. When she uttered the words that meant death, every neck curved, every arrow-shaped head went back and jaw opened until the hooked fangs were visible, and every head wavered as though about to strike. Even if they were a little beyond reaching distance, it was a trying spectacle for the instant it lasted. At the words peace, and still, their mood changed, their heads sunk, their jaws closed, and they drooped listlessly around the woman who called them her slaves.

Then her hand caught one of the largest by the neck. Instantly the serpent coiled itself swiftly around her arm, with its head erect as before, and when Vashti made a sudden step and thrust it forward, it was within striking distance of Magdalena.

The latter was equal to the occasion. She waved her hand calmly, and spoke in a low, unruffled tone:

"Take it away. I am not appalled by your mummery. It is unpleasant, but beyond that I have no fears. Whoever you may be, there is one here who is your master. If he had intended me to die, he would have left me to die in the desert, or he would never have awakened me from the sleep that might as well as not have been the sleep of death. You cannot make me afraid, but you might succeed in making me dangerous. Take your slaves elsewhere. I will have none of them. Zillah, we will continue our stroll. The view from here is fine, but some other time I think I can enjoy it better. At present I desire to see what is the prospect from the other sides of the building."

At the appearance of Vashti, Zillah had fallen back in silence, but without evincing any particular emotion. Directly addressed, she bowed silently, and continued to lead the way as before. They passed down the broad, high steps, and turned into a path that led around the edifice, and which was wide enough for a dozen men to walk in abreast.

The horsemen were still circling around in the plain beyond, and in their chief Magdalena had recognized the King of the Camels. She could not see that he had noted her presence; but when she thought him most interested in the evolutions that were being made at his orders, he sped straight toward her, without even a preliminary glance.

"I see that you have met Vashti. Trust her not. She is useful, but she will slay for the sake of slaying, when the humor takes her. I do not doubt she would kill me if it were in her power; and if her evil eyes fall upon you with full power there is death in them such as you know nothing of. Make her neither your friend nor your enemy."

"Not my enemy, for fear she should remove one you have need of; not my friend, for fear that we should prove too much for you. Two women against one man—what chance would he have for his life, if they played to win it?"

"Fools sometimes hit the truth where wise men would see only a blank. There is something in what you say; yet take my advice, or suffer the consequences. You may know more later on. Meantime, you shall be royally lodged, and have the entire freedom to my domains; or to as much of them as you can penetrate. If you have an eye for the picturesque it may be worth while to watch my boys at their play. Pity it is that it must be play. It is not likely that any enemy can penetrate hither, and it is too far across the desert to lead them on a foray where they could flesh their steel. Yet, some day—who knows?"

Abruptly he ceased speaking and returned to his pastime.

It was worth while to watch, and yet Magdalena turned away. It seemed to her that there was some invisible power commanding her to stay, and that her own interests and safety demanded resistance. When she looked at those mad evolutions it must be at her own invitation. There would probably be time enough for that, hereafter.

When the two girls had reached the rear of the building the view differed but little from that in front. There were a few smaller buildings, dwarfed in their appearance by the huge temple that she was surveying.

Here and there were little heaps, that might be the remains of buildings that had fallen to ruin. They were arranged in a circle, in the perimeter of which was the one great temple that yet remained untouched by the hand of time. As on the other side, the plain stretched back until it was met by the desert, and nowhere was there any well-defined road to show how the king was accustomed to leave or enter his domain. If she was free to go, how could Magdalena tell in which direction lay the land from which she had been transported? Yet the presence of the horses in the plain behind her seemed to say that there was a practical way out if she only knew it. To learn where it was should be her first effort. She turned to her companion.

"Zillah, I have faith in you; speak to me truly. Is there a way to leave this place, if I should wish to?"

"If you should wish to, yes. They who stay here long care not to leave—if they live."

"And do you know it?"

The girl shook her head wearily, and was silent.

"With the camels I know that the journey can be made; and it cannot be beyond the powers of a horseman, since I have seen such here."

"There are times; and there are other times. Now and then—it may not be for years again—there are storms, and water pools, and a way that may be tried with some chance of escape; but it is never for long. And for the horses—they are all young—they may have been brought here when they were colts. If the king desired them he could have them carried on the camels. What he says must be done is done. It is folly to war with him; let us drift with the stream."

Magdalena was looking keenly at the speaker, her mind fixed on compelling the girl to speak the truth. She could see a change in that she no longer seemed to be so much of a foreigner in her dialect, nor was there such a far-away sound in her voice. Magdalena began to believe that she could make of her a friend that could be trusted; and that from her it would not be hard to obtain all the facts about this strange place that she might know.

"If I cannot leave this place tell me at least why I was brought hither. This man must know that I was searching for this spot with no friendly intentions; that one day, even if not now, I may be his pronounced enemy. I begin to believe that he was safely beyond my reach. What folly to bring an enemy within the gates. It must be that he intends sooner or later to slay me. Why has he not done so already? Can you guess? If so, I adjure you to answer me."

"He has told nothing; I have heard nothing, but I can guess. He had need of thee. If a start was made to seek him it was because he so willed it. In a little while thou wilt be as much his slave as the rest of us. Pity it is; but what canst thou do? When he tells thee to come thou wilt go, no matter what lies between. If he tells thee to speak, thy lips will utter strange things, and in the sleep that he can give to thine eyelids thou canst see strange things, and hidden mysteries. He will make his profit in thy coming; never fear. There are things lost that are yet to be found; and under the ground are the hidden treasures of that which was here-

tofore. Ask me no more, for he is more powerful than thou art; and he may know that thou art looking into his mind with my eyes."

The girl had once more changed her aspect and her speech. It seemed as though she was again under the control of a will which was stronger than her own, and Magdalena, quick to take note, received a revelation. Of some such power as this she had before been vaguely conscious without understanding its possibilities. She had been thinking of the King of the Camels as she questioned Zillah, and the answers received to her queries were framed from the thoughts that were in the mind of the chief.

If she was right in her suspicion the power that she could have over this girl was the one thing she would have asked for. As yet it was not thoroughly established, but if it was so great at the outset how long would it be before it would be the greater than that of the man whom she had been acknowledging as her master? There was hope in the thought—and an explanation of everything that had puzzled her in what she had just heard.

There was a warning, also. The king had brought her there to be one of his subjects, and he had already found her obedient to his will. Until Zillah spoke, everything, from the time she had fairly composed herself for slumber on the desert to the moment when she awoke in her couch in the palace of the king, was a blank. Now, she had a glimmering of certain strange dreams. If she could only recall them, she might be willing to accept them as something more than visions of her slumber. Very thoughtful was she as she walked along, with Zillah still by her side. Henceforth she knew of one thing, at least, against which she must guard; and she was pondering whether or not that guard would be in vain; why Zillah was not used instead of herself as the medium for clairvoyant researches that she believed were being made; and what the secret was that was being sought.

CHAPTER XIII.

A WHIRL OF THE ROPE.

MR. ARMSTRONG'S questions did not at all convey the idea that he was alarmed; nor did Aztec Alf so think. The latter was more accustomed to this style of fighting, and knew more about the defenses of their position, so that naturally he was looked to as the leader in the affair that was now on hand.

"Take it easy, and wait to see what they want to try. I must have struck them just before they had reached the water, and like as not they are wild for a drink. This sandy soil on the plain will carry no track for any time or you could see the trail that the regular visits of the reds to this spot would leave. They will make a savage fight of it before they go; but we hold the advantage of position, and I am in no hurry to be frightened over the probable result. Ah! there is the first move on either side, and I think the result is in our favor. Listen."

The three listened—and what they heard was not cheerful. There had been a light thud, which attracted the attention of Aztec Alf. Now there was a low whine, and the noise of clanking bones, and torn flesh. An Apache had crept close to the rock; and Draco had met him.

"They wanted us to look out on the plain while that fellow crept in to spy out how the land lay. Now, they will wait some time for him to come back. After they decide that he will never come you may expect an attack."

"Wake me up when they put in an appearance," said Armstrong, with a yawn. "I'm not yet used to this sort of work, and it tells. I believe I could sleep twenty-four hours without turning. There is no use for all of us to be keeping on the watch, and I guess you know best how to work the tiger. She might not like me to interfere. And Barney is nodding already. If I don't hurry he will be asleep before me."

Even a few moments of sleep are worth something to a man who has lost some rest, and expects to lose a great deal more. Mr. Armstrong knew this, and so did Barney. Once more they entrusted their safety to chance—and Aztec Alf's keeping—and were in oblivion before Alf could frame a consent to the proposition.

The tiger man looked at them as they lay there, and envied them the rest they were obtaining, even while he admired the hardihood that could allow them to sleep when there was danger so near.

"He justifies all that I have heard of him," muttered the man. "I wonder if he really cares, whatever may happen. If any man can locate the hidden treasures beyond the desert, he is the man. But who would imagine that he would make the attempt without being better prepared."

For everything that may befall him on the way, and afterward, he has nothing but his own wonderful courage and skill. Pity if it should all be wasted, and the man lost. Something tells me that he may bring me evil fortune, yet I am destined to meet him whichever way I may turn. It is dollars to cents that if I were to steal away now, while he sleeps, to-morrow

night I would be with him again, and in as much danger as ever. Would it be worth while to test the matter and see?"

He looked hesitatingly at the man who lay at his feet, and then at the plain below.

Something attracted his attention. There was a movement on foot; and to his surprise he saw that it was from, and not to the rock. For some reason or other the attack was not only delayed; it was abandoned. A dark line of moving forms, dimly though they were seen, showed him the Apaches were hastily leaving the spot. While he looked, uncertain whether this was *bona fide*, or was some Indian wile, Draco came lightly bounding up the stairway, and frisking to his side, softly purring as though well pleased at something.

"What is it, old girl? Have they left us? Strange that they should do so; but they do not deceive you very often. There must be some reason for it: what is it?"

The tiger could say nothing more; but it was plain that there was no uneasiness in the glance that she gave toward the retreating forms below. The whole thing was a puzzle that was worth the thinking out before Aztec Alf put himself in the way of danger, or allowed his vigilance to relax. He made a motion with his arm that Draco understood. She stepped away lightly, descended the pathway, and went bounding out from the base of the rock, frolicking around in the starlight, taking ever-increasing circles with a freedom that said the enemy had vanished, Alf all the time watching from above.

"Gone they are," he said, at length. "If a live red was within a hundred rods she would nose him out. With her the dead ones don't count. What were they frightened at? Not this outfit, surely. And unless the need for water was more pressing than I had hoped for, they would never have thrown up their hands until they had found out everything in ours. If there are no developments pretty soon, I will have to take a look at things myself. Draco is good enough as far as she can go; but when she comes back she hasn't much to say."

While he pondered, his eye by chance turned away from Draco, and that part of the plain on which she was gamboling; and fell upon a single moving figure, that was speeding away in an entirely different direction from that taken by the Apaches. Only an eye as keen as his, and accustomed to spying in darkness as well as light, would have noted it, and even Aztec Alf was unable to make it out with any clearness.

Still, there was something in the misshapen figure and its ungainly motion, that suggested to his mind a man on a camel.

Though he could not be sure of it, he was not mistaken, and hit it pretty closely when he thought that the presence of the strange rider was sufficient to turn away the Indians from the siege of the rock, and send them off in something like a panic. They knew something of this king in the desert, and feared him worse than death itself.

After a while Draco came prowling back, and all was still on the plain. Barney and his master slept, and Alf grew tired of inaction. He had a curiosity to see what damage had been done the enemy during the sharp little fight, and satisfy himself that they had taken themselves off while leaving their dead behind. He looked at Armstrong, and shook his head. Of what use would it be to waken him now? Better to let him sleep until it was time to have him take his turn on guard. The Indians were gone, the camel-riders were gone—if they had been there—and there was nothing left to harm them. He allowed them to slumber on while he went down to explore.

He found the mangled body of the red-skin slain by the tiger; and some of the motionless little heaps were still there. Beyond that he could see little more than when he was above, though he stole out some distance on the plain.

Satisfied that there was nothing in the vicinity to be discovered, he turned to go back—and found how widely he had been mistaken. There was a slight rustle, a whirr; and then Aztec Alf fell forward on his face, a rope around his neck and a man tugging at the other end. The attack was so sudden and so skillfully made that he had no chance to guard against it.

Afterward he would have made a fight, and the one man might have found it no easy matter to hold his prisoner; but the one was no longer alone. From the ground sprung two others, and though, for a few moments there was a lively tumbling and rolling, it was not long before the prisoner was bound hand and foot. There was a little consultation among his captors, and as a result one of them darted hastily away, while the others remained on guard, watching their prisoner with a keenness that showed how great was their regard for his prowess.

Alf uttered never a word. A whistle might have brought Draco; but as long as the bands remained upon him that would do no good. Jack and his man might have also been brought upon the scene, but Alf was not in the position in which he cared to see them. He would sooner risk what might befall him than to have them see, at present at least, how he had kept watch.

Of course, so long as he was ungagged he had the power to give an alarm, that he did not doubt would bring the sport to his feet; but until it seemed necessary to secure Armstrong's safety he did not intend to do it.

It was uncertain whether the men knew of the presence on the rock of the two sleepers. They acted as though they did not. When the third man returned Alf was almost certain of it. He came mounted, and leading three horses. The animals had been lying not very far off, and he had failed to see them, so low had they crouched, and so motionless had they been.

One of the men—the one who had thrown the lasso—spoke, for the first time.

"Take it easy, young man. I reckon you ought to be thankful for getting helped out of the mess. The reds were after your wool, hot; and they would have had it, sure. I don't just say there is no danger of your getting hurt as it is; because there is a right smart chance of your having to climb a tree when you get to the other end of the route, but you will have a chance for your white alley, which you wouldn't have had if you had fallen into their hands. If you want to take your milk like a little man we are going to treat you well while you are in with us. If you are going to try to make trouble we are going to see that you are in no shape to do it. How is it?"

"I never kicked when I saw I couldn't reach, in my life; and I won't be apt to begin it now. You have me, do your worst."

Alf spoke sullenly. He was in no good humor. Even if he wasn't in no physical danger he believed these men would hinder him from going further on the way he had chosen; and it might be a long time before he could again strike the trail that he was anxious to follow. His growl was greeted with a laugh.

"Ha, ha! They say there is something of the Indian about you, and I guess you would stand up to the stake with the worst of them. All the same, you don't know what the worst of the old man's means. If you did you wouldn't be trying that sort of bluff game on him. Of course, what you say to us goes to headquarters when we turn in our report. If he banged you off-hand you might not care; and even plain roasting at a slow fire wouldn't go so bad; but he can go you a heap better than that. He can twist your soul right up into little knots, and the pinch beats red-hot pinchers all hollow. And I think, to be frank, he has it in for you. Crawl on. You will know more about it when you get there. And, as for that tiger of yours; if you want the sweet little pet to go over to the majority you might call it up now, before we start, and we will have the job off of our minds."

"Thanks for the explanation. I will not take anything back. And if you can get a shot at Draco you are welcome to drop her. She has not been up to the line with me lately, and if I meet her again I will have something to say to her myself. If it is no secret, which way do you intend to take me?"

"No secret at all. Yonder lies our course, and you will go along with us, part of the way, at least."

As he spoke the man pointed to the southwest. It was the way he had intended to go, and Alf wondered whether the fellow told the truth. It was hard to believe.

CHAPTER XIV.

DESCENSUS AVERNUS.

"BARNEY, have you got the will of a mouse? I believe that I haven't."

"Sure, an' what's the matter wid ye now?" answered Barney, leisurely rolling over, and looking up at Jack, who stood in the full glare of morning sunshine, looking out over the desert with such an air of disgust on his face that his words seemed very tame.

"Because, if you have, I am going to see that both of us don't go to sleep again at the same time until we are out of this mix. The old man of the camels has been around again. I feel it in my bones. And, as usual, the man with the tiger has turned up missing. What are we going to do with him? He's like the Irishman's flea. Just when you get your finger on him he isn't there. He may be honest enough, and the best sort of a parli to tie to in a pinch, but for general business it does seem that he is rather unreliable."

"Faith, an' he's taken the same owld man, an' all the rid-skins wid him, an' the way is wide open. What more wad ye be after wantin'?"

Barney was up and looking around. He did not receive the news as though it was startling; and, in fact, it would have taken some intelligence a great deal more surprising than this to astonish him. On these expeditions he was ready for 'most anything.

"And left us the tiger!" exclaimed Armstrong, with more animation in his tone, and as he spoke Draco came leisurely patting up the narrow path, as friendly a look on her face as could be imagined.

"Don't seem a bit excited. If she had eaten him she couldn't have a more innocent look on her face. Guess there is no use to ask her where

he has gone. Probably she don't know; and if she did she wouldn't tell. Just keep your revolver handy until you find out what her intentions are. Perhaps they are honorable, but I wouldn't like to say."

"From the looks av her chaps Oi should say she had 'aten her br'ikfast, an' that 'aves us safe for a while. It's a bit av pony stake Oi would have meself av Oi could say a way to cook it. The carkiss is there, an' all it nades is the foire. It's hungry Oi am, as a wolf, an' the d'id ponies wad sthand baytwayne me an' starvation."

"With a little effort I guess the fire can be managed; and if we are going to keep on the way we have been going, there might be worse things to take with us than jerked meat. I don't like to make a smoke here, but I suppose it's die dog or eat the hatchet. It may bring our friends back to look after our scalps, which it seems they overlooked in their hurry. Singular! I don't see how they came to do it."

"Onliss Misther Aztic Alf persuadid thim. It's a gentil way he is supposed to have, much loike yer own."

"True, true! Well, they have left us, sure enough. We may as well look around, and if we see no traces of their presence we can begin to get ready for the tramp. By all rules of calculation it is going to be a long one. There is plenty of room down there for us to spread ourselves on the walk."

"An' plinty for buryin' purposiz," retorted Barney, also looking to the southwest, as Mr. Armstrong pointed. In reality, they were both taking a careful view of the ground before risking a descent to the plain.

"Sure the cat says somethin'; more beloiike she acts as av it wor wid her nose," he added, as his attention was called to the tiger, which raised itself unasily from the ground where it had thrown itself but a moment before.

They listened attentively; and heard the sound of horses' hoofs, coming at a gallop near the base of the rock. When they leaned over they saw that the animals were riderless, and that there were just two of them.

"Luck widout ind!" exclaimed Barney. "Providence is good to us. All we have to do is to catch thim, an' thim we can roide on at our ayeze."

"That's all. First catch your hare, and then cook it. And how long do you think they would last if we were in the saddle?"

"Ivery bit as long as we afoot. It's the chance av the sayson, an' Barney Kane moves away in the saddle. Whin they can go no further we can tourn thim loose."

"And leave them in a fix that they can't get out of. That is no fair play. If we start so, we will stay together until we are all out of the mix, and if we can't make the ripple we all go out of the wet together. How does that strike you?"

"Oi'm consintin' now to 'most anything in rayson. Whin the pinch comes will be toime enough to argy the matter."

There was not much time to be lost in arguing the question now. It was more important to devise ways and means to capture the animals.

The task was not as hopeless as at first glance it might seem. Evidently the equines had designs on the spring at the foot of the rock, but, for a little while, they were willing to caracole around, and see how much danger there might be in coming nearer.

That would allow the men time to reach one of the dead ponies, at which Barney had already been casting longing eyes. There was a lasso hanging at the side of this animal, and with it they might capture at least one of the mustangs, when they came up to drink. If that failed, the only way to do would be to keep them away until their thirst tamed them. They were evidently broken animals, anyhow; so that the task in the latter case would not probably prove a very tedious one.

With men like Barney and his master their dispositions would be made like clock-work. They succeeded in arranging themselves without adding to the fright of the mustangs. In due time they captured them. Then they prepared their frugal meal; and put the spoils of war, in the shape of the trappings of the Apaches who had fallen, upon their mustangs. As they were now ready nothing was to be gained by waiting longer. Only, before leaving they found the spot where Aztec Alf had been captured, and Mr. Armstrong read the story of the affair as though it was written in a book. To his surprise the footprints of the horses that had borne the little party away tended to the southwest. As that was the direction he had already made up his mind to go, Jack dropped in on the trail without the least hesitation. It was not very likely that he would overtake the men before they halted, but it was a pointer that had a double significance. Alf was certainly a captive; and just as certainly he was being taken in the direction he wished to go. Perhaps the result might be disastrous, but Mr. Armstrong was inclined to believe that he could follow this trail to the other end; and that there was another instance of the providential happenings that were drawing him toward the secret place of the man with the camels. Where other horsemen

could go he could go also; and he journeyed on with brighter hopes than ever.

The second day's journey was much like the first so far as the nature of the ground over which they passed was concerned. They went more rapidly, though; and with a great deal more comfort. The mustangs seemed to be desert born, and to be on the best of terms with themselves and their new masters. They frolicked along in a tireless way that endeared them to the heart of Armstrong, who loved a free-going horse, and acted as though they knew every step of the way. Without the least guidance they would have kept on the track of those in front, though it was only now and then that traces of their passage could be seen.

The arid miles dropped behind them, and though there were no signs of food or water through the livelong day, they never faltered or flagged. Of course there was something in judicious handling; but there was more in the horses themselves. It was only when night was drawing near that the appearance of the ground began to change. Even then there was nothing to positively indicate that they were likely to reach a desirable camping-place. The ground was a little rougher, the soil not quite so arid-looking. As far as the eye could reach ahead of them the prospect was a barren one, though the ground was all the while trending upward.

"No use," sighed Armstrong, just at night-fall.

"I can swear that there is water somewhere ahead—I can smell it. But we won't reach it before dark; and maybe not to-night. The only thing to do is to keep on going; and when we drop no one could say that we had not done our best."

"Sure, as long as the b'astes k'ape it up, it's not meself that will be dispondint. An' they act as though they could be thravelin' all noight widout breakin' av the'r hearts. It's thim that knows the road better than we; an' av there wor danger it's the ither way they w'd want to be goin'. Let thim have their own way, an' we can't come out far wrong, as yer Honor have been a sayin'."

"Their own way goes, and it's heaps of fun we are going to have out of it. I couldn't pick out a course now if I wanted to try. It appears to me that they want to shear off to the right."

"Lit thim go!" shouted Barney, with more than ordinary vigor, as his mustang wheeled and bolted, taking him along at a rate such as they had not seen during the whole day. Armstrong's horse was affected the same way, and for a little while it looked as though the two animals were going to run away. Then they suddenly halted as the men gave a quick pull on their bridles. Men and beasts were of the same opinion, and it is doubtful if the tug brought a stop a particle sooner than it would have been made anyhow. As far as they could see they were on the brink of a canyon, a *barranca*, or a deep fissure in the ground, that extended downward, no one had any idea how far.

With drooping heads, and blowing somewhat from their late exertions, the steeds stood there, looking into the gulf.

"Here's your water," laughed Armstrong, as he heard a smothered exclamation of disgust from his man. "The next question—and a mighty important one it is—how to utilize it? It's some thousand miles down there, and if we should reach bottom some confounded Chinaman would be laying for us with a shot-gun—always providing they have such things in the Flowery Kingdom."

"Hang yer fate over, an' thin lit go. Oi will risk the min wid the shot-gun," retorted Barney, who had already dismounted.

"It's crazy Oi am for a dhrink, an' av Oi'm not mistook it's wather Oi hear below me. Oi am goin' down av it takes a whale."

"It will be something very like a whale it will get if it takes you. If you wait a bit, perhaps the horses can show us what ought to be next on the carpet. They don't generally stop right here; and you can trust them to find the way to headquarters. It is pretty certain that we can't go ahead unless we learn to fly; and until day comes it will be too dark for us to try to find where there is any trail leading to the right or the left. Give your horse his head and trust him to know which way to go. It is our only chance."

"An' isn't it that same thing Oi have been doin', and niver a bit will he move. It's not meself that kin wait a minnit longer. Av me eyes don't desave me it's here that they go down, an' it's the way Oi am afther foindin' av it takes me loife. Good-by, an' look afther the stades. Av Oi niver come back yez kin give me wages to the fourst widdy that claims Barney Kane for her lawful husband."

Barney was in dead earnest about finding a way down to the bed of the *barranca*. He felt sure that there was a path that was capable of descent; and that water would be found below. Jack might have restrained him by a positive order, but, to tell the truth, he was curious and impatient himself. He let him go without protest.

It seemed as though he had struck the path-

way, at first. It was steep, but offered a footing.

Almost in an instant Barney was out of sight, but as he groped his way downward, he kept up a running fire of remarks, intended to be of a cheerful character. Then there was a sudden slip and scramble; and Mr. Armstrong knew that his assistant was going down with unpremeditated haste; most likely to his death.

CHAPTER XV.

DOWN THE STREAM.

BOTH of the men were used to perilous adventure, and had nerve sufficient to meet whatever befell them without shrinking, but this was an evil of the kind that would shock Mr. Armstrong more than any average casualty. When Barney dropped he felt as distinct a blow as though some one had struck him with a knife. Hastily he threw aside the rein that he had been holding in his hand, and sprang toward the spot where Kane had disappeared. There he bent over, and looked into the black gulf beneath him.

No sound came up, and he knew that he was too late to hear the falling body as it landed on the rocks that probably covered the bottom of the barranca. He thought of an old paper he had in one of his pockets, and hastily wrapped it up into a loose ball. This he lighted with a match and dropped down. It illuminated faintly the high side of the crevice, showing him the almost sheer slope, down which a goat could scarcely have scrambled in safety; but it went out long before it reached the foot of the wall.

And then, to his intense relief, he heard a noise that was fainter than he cared to hear it; though welcome even as it was, since it could belong to no one but Barney:

"Av that's ownly a star, it's a lost mon that Oi am; but av it's Gintle Jack wid a loight, it's better than tin d'id min that Oi count meself. Mister Armstrong-acushla, darlint! Don't l'ave me. It's the brith that is all out av me body, an' d'id Oi am ontirely. Sp'ake to me av Oi am in the ither worruld."

"All right, Barney. How badly are you hurt, and about how far is it down to where you are? I'll have you out of there sure enough; so, if you are hurt, brace up. Jack Armstrong won't desert his pard."

"Oi am not afraid av yer desartin' me. All Oi am a-fearin' is that you'll troy to come down here, an' we'll all both be in the soup together. Sthand back! It's a terrible bad place atther darruk. Oi think Oi broke a lig onnyhow."

The distance was great and Barney's voice was weak, but Armstrong heard every word distinctly, and felt relieved. Kane had a tolerably clear head; and if he was uncertain which bones had been broken, perhaps there were none fractured after all. He answered cheerfully, and told the Irishman to show a light if he was able, so that he could the better locate him, and advise.

It seemed a hard struggle for the light to reach Mr. Armstrong's eye, but the match that was lighted in response to the request gave some idea of the distance Barney had fallen, if it did nothing else.

"No use, Barney. I can't let you lie there all night. If you can't move, I will have to come down. I will fasten the lasso up here and I think I can make it in safety. If you had just been thoughtful enough to do that before you started, it would have saved a heap of trouble. Look out that you don't go further and fare worse. Don't go blundering around until I reach you."

"An' what good will ye be afther doin' me whin it's so darruk that Oi can't say the hand before me face. Bettler stay there till mornin'. It's an illegant place to rist, an' av me stringth comes back in a bit, Oi think Oi can r'ache the wather. Oi hear it quito plain."

Mr. Armstrong said nothing. It was not worth while to argue the matter with Kane; and now he was not sure that the senses of the little Irishman were not wandering. He could not believe that there was a stream there in spite of all that he had said, and wonderful as are the things that can sometimes be found in such solitudes. He busied himself finding a place to fasten the picket-pin that was at the end of the rope that served as either a lariat or a lasso.

He found a place where he could make it fast, though it was not exactly over the spot where Barney lay. Very methodical was Mr. Armstrong about his work, for he had no desire to meet with a repetition of the accident, or get himself in a position from which he could not return.

About this time Draco turned up. She had been with them for the most of the day, and they had become so accustomed to her that it was only at such times as she temporarily disappeared that the two had thought of her at all. She dropped out of sight a little before sundown, and this was the first Armstrong had seen of her since. She stalked up independently, and stood watching his movements in silence. There was a certain air of contentment about her that Armstrong could feel, if he could not see, and he was willing to bet any money that she had found the way to the water below.

"Good cat, how did you get down to the drink?"

If there is such a thing there I guess you have had your nose in it. Animal intelligence in such matters beats human reason, every day in the year."

Draco stretched herself in front of him, purring musically. As he looked he could see the flicker of her green eyes as she lazily winked at him. Her coming gave him an idea. He allowed the rope to hang unused for the present, and watched the horses, which he had turned loose to wander at their will. It was true that they had brought the wanderers to a spot where it seemed impossible to descend; but then they might be accustomed to halting first at that place, and afterward reaching water of their own accord. If it was only daylight, as Mr. Armstrong thought, he would be willing to trust his own eyesight; with darkness around, and a necessity for immediate movement, he was not above taking help from any direction.

For a little the mustangs wandered about, aimlessly. Then, as if moved by a common impulse they turned their heads in the same direction, and trotted off.

Armstrong watched them go with a rueful countenance.

"There's your animal intelligence for you!" he exclaimed. "They may know all about the place; but if they do they don't intend to give it away. Sure as death they have taken the back track. They will turn up again at the castle rock somewhere about daybreak, if one can judge from the way they are going. So much for the experiment. I think I will stick to the original programme, and try the rope."

But little time was lost with the experiment, since it had failed almost as soon as it was begun.

For a little Mr. Armstrong scrambled down aided by the rope, meeting with no difficulty. There was a gentle slope to the rock, which had deceived Barney; and just enough unevenness to give a secure footing. And then, without a bit of warning, the rock became as smooth as glass, Jack's feet slipped from under him, and for his grip on the rope he would have gone down flying. As it was, he went slipping down for a few yards at a rate that was alarming, and almost blistered his fingers.

After that he proceeded with more caution, holding some slight conversation with Barney on the way. The voice of the Irishman was stronger now, and the distance between the two did not appear by any means as great as when peering down from the upper world. Only, it was terribly dark there, and there was such an uncertainty about what might be still further below. One thing was sure. There was little more rope.

While Armstrong was making this reflection his feet not only slipped—he swung clear of the rock, over the edge of which his legs scraped too sharply to be pleasant, and there he hung. At the same time, a little stone which he had loosened dropped down a short distance, and then stopped with a thud which was not too low for Armstrong to hear.

The sound gave him an idea of the distance it was to rock bottom, and he did not hesitate. It would be as easy, no doubt, to scramble up a few yards as it would be to attempt to regain his footing. He slid on until he felt the knot at the end of the rope. Then he opened his hand and dropped lightly to the bottom of the barranca; which turned out to have been but a few feet below him.

"An' it's here we both are, two rats in the trap; where's the cat? Az for me, Oi can't move widout bein' kilt wid the pain ov it, an' Oi don't say where the good av it is, you bein' in the same box. Av course it wor no use to ttry to sthop ye; an' there's great satisfaction havin' comphany in me misery. Would ye be wantin' foerst to cut aff me head, or boind up me toe. Av ye'r' here ye may az well be of some use."

"Don't get crabbed or cranky, old man. I didn't expect to do much but stay near you when I started down; and now that I have got here I know it. There is no getting away again before daylight, and unless you are in too much pain to stand the wait, it is just as comfortable a place as we could find to pass the night in."

"Will, it's not the pain Oi am in, but the want av wather that's a-killin' av me. An' to hear it a-gurglin', an' a-plashin', at me elbow az it wor, is a dhrivin' av me woulde. An' not a chrop in the canteen."

"Hold on to that. If there is water so near I guess we can come at it. Let's have a little light on the subject. If a fellow can once see where he is going it's not so much trouble to get there."

"But the deauce to git back," growled Barney, who was in sufficiently bad humor to feel bearish.

Lighting another match Mr. Armstrong took a view of his immediate surroundings, and found that they were on the upper part of a shelving rock, which sloped down to the stream that hurried along through the gorge.

The opposite bank was invisible, but from the sound made by the stream Mr. Armstrong judged that it was of some width, and that the

water was deep, and the current strong. Certainly it would not be easy to get down to it, as the level of the water was some feet below the rock on which he kneeled, and the lower bank was perpendicular.

Fortunately, as he thought, he had a canteen at his shoulder, and it was possible that the string by which it was slung might be sufficiently long to reach the distance. If not, the strap from Barney's could be added, which would certainly give enough rope. As Barney seemed suffering for a drink, and it was no pleasant task to grope around in the dark, he tried his own canteen, as it was, very cautiously lowering it, while taking care that he did not overbalance himself, or slip from the insecure footing, on which he now kneeled.

He felt the stream surge up against the canteen, and was surprised at the force of the current. He was also vexed to find that he needed an inch or more of strap.

He edged a little nearer to the brink of the bank, flattened himself still closer to the rock, and lowered the canteen until he could hear the water gurgling through the neck.

And then, his feet and knees slid a little, his head suddenly appeared to weigh a ton, and draw him forward. He knew that he had overbalanced himself, and made a quick though unsuccessful effort to recover, and then plunged, head-first, downward, into the stream.

CHAPTER XVI.

A LIGHT ON THE SHORE.

MR. ARMSTRONG was not of the kind who calls for help when in a fix. He generally relied upon himself, though he was rather accustomed to finding Barney somewhere near his shoulder when he was needed.

Of course, in this case, with Barney lying more or less seriously injured, in a darkness that could almost be felt, he could not hope for any assistance from the Irishman; and he was, indeed, careful to repress anything like a cry for aid, that might startle Kane, and cause him to plunge into danger.

The water proved to be deep—so deep that he could not touch bottom with his feet so long as he kept his head above it—and the moment he struck it the current began to carry him along at a rapid rate, so that he suspected he had dropped into a rapids. He did not know which side of him the bank was, since the fall had somewhat bewildered him; and though a moment's cool reflection would have told him to shear to the left, he instinctively veered to the right, swimming carefully, so as to lessen the danger of being hurt by being flung against the rocky side. By the time his hands touched the opposite shore his wits had returned, and he reached up to see what the chance was to make a landing.

This side proved to be no better than the other. The flush rock slipped back from his grasp, and he was still hurried along.

While there was life there was hope; but the position was a grave one.

The rapids might last for but a little distance; or they might extend on indefinitely. It was more than likely that somewhere near they took a tumble down a precipice. In any event he could not hope to keep his head above water until daylight; and in the darkness, unless the way of the water changed very materially, he could not make a landing.

Of course, he did not lose his nerve; but he recognized that the chance was against him, and just a trifle regretfully he sighed:

"Good-by, Barney. I was doing the best I could for you; and I wouldn't feel this half as much if I had not left you in such a bad box. I suppose your wit will take you out; but you will never know what became of me."

Mr. Armstrong was floating with the stream, one hand scraping lightly along the bank, ready to close on anything that might come within his reach and offer a chance for a grip. What, then, was his surprise to hear his thoughts answered by a voice that was too familiar to be mistaken.

"Sure, an' av ye thought ye would l'ave Barney Kane behindt, it wor the mishtake av yer loife. He's here an' willin' to go through foire an' wather befoire he'll desert ye. Sp'ake to me, av ye pl'aze, an' till me that ye'r' all roight."

"So you are there again, are you? Good enough. I was worrying about your being left behind to starve; and here you come, right side up. It makes me proud. But all the same, I would like to know what you are doing in the soup. I thought if you wer'n't dead you were a cripple."

The sound of Mr. Armstrong's voice furnished the guide that Barney wanted. By the time that it ceased Kane had edged his way across the current sufficiently to be at Armstrong's side, so that he could reach out and touch him with one hand.

By this time he was quite himself again. He answered Jack's plaint as cheerfully as usual.

"Niver a cripple. Whin the toime comes for that it's over the range Oi w'ad sooner be goin'. The shock koinde av stunted me, an' Oi wor a bit bewildered; now Oi am all roight, an'

ridly. Where did ye think av goin', this foine avening?"

"You know about as much as I do. We seem to be going down the flume instead of up, so there ought to be no danger as long as we can keep afloat. It is the stopping, by-and-by, that is bothering me. If I was satisfied about where we would pull up at I could float along quite comfortably. But this river don't seem to be down in any of the bills as far as I remember them."

"Faith, an' there's somethin' sp'akin' now; an' ave we ain't near the ind av the journey it's moighty like a rist we'll be takin'. D'ye hear it now?"

There was no doubt, as soon as he gave the subject attention, that Mr. Armstrong heard something; but what it was he was not so sure. It might be a cataract—most likely it was.

At the same time, there was another sound at his side, that he did not, at first, understand. When he had turned his head, and listened a little more sharply, he thought of Draco, from whom he had parted before descending into the canyon.

He was right. The tiger had no notion of deserting them, and had joined them in the swim. Of course, it must have found, or known some path down, that perhaps would have served Jack just as well as the one he took. Anyway, she was there, swimming along beside them, and if the low whisper she gave was to go for anything, not altogether satisfied with the present condition of affairs.

"Don't blame you a bit, old girl, and if you are as anxious as I am to get out of the mess, I am willing to listen to any remark that you wish to make. It looks to me as though we couldn't last much longer; so, if you have anything more to say better say it quick, and then look out for your precious neck. I tell you, it is broken bones that will be next in order. From the way that sounds I should say there is a fall of a hundred feet or more, and even Gentle Jack can't take that without coming out the worse for wear, and not much inclined for general conversation."

The two men had not been long in the water, but so rapidly had they been hurried along that they were a mile or more from the spot where they had come over the cliff, and now their progress was faster than ever, and the noise of the cataract grew louder. It could not be very far distant. A few moments would probably settle their fate unless they succeeded in making a speedy landing. Of that there was little hope. While the current was growing faster each moment the rocky side of the river bed was, if anything, more precipitous than ever. Jack was inclined to doubt the evidence of his senses when a stream of light met his eyes as they swept around a slight bend in the course of the stream.

Barney saw the light also, and had no doubts about it.

"Sure, an' here's soigns av inhabitants at last. Av it's whoite min they are, they'll befri'nd us for the love av the six; an' av it's rid, they'll be apt to git us out, av it's ownly for a bonfoire they w'a'd be makin' av us hereafter. Shall Oi give a yill?"

"A minute, Barney. With a light on the question of how to get out it may not be so hard to find the answer. We might pass from the frying-pan into the fire if we stirred up the fellows in camp there."

"Blissings on the mon that invinted the cartridge! Isn't our powther droy? An' wid our tools in our hands what w'a'd we care for their good intentions?"

"Nevertheless, the chances are that we have to fight, and we may as well have the benefit of the surprise if we can. See, the tiger appears to know something about the party. She is veering over that way for either a fight or a frolic. If she can find us a path up the bank before we get into the glare of that fire, so much the better."

Whether it was that Draco knew the canyon, or that her eyesight was better than that of the two men who watched her head, moving like a dark spot along on the surface of the water, she struck the bank at a practicable spot, and they could see her creep slowly up the bank as they came to the shore below.

As they swung in, the feet of Mr. Armstrong touched the solid bottom, and he knew that for the present they were saved.

None too soon was it, either. They did not cross the stream without a terrible struggle, and a few rods further down the rapids they would have found themselves unable to direct their course at all.

But by the sheerest kind of luck they were able to strike the bank where they could ascend unobserved, and have the opportunity to inspect the campers before trusting themselves within their reach. The chances were a thousand to one that they would prove to be enemies.

When the two had dragged their dripping forms once more out of the reach of the water and taken a brief breathing spell, they looked around.

In the direction whence they had come they

could see nothing; but overhead there was a suspicion of daylight in the streak of sky that lay between the two walls of rock, and the glimmering fire down the canyon was now not more than a couple of hundred yards away.

"No use to wait much longer," whispered Jack. "As soon as the cascade that is pouring down my back quits making such an infernally audible noise, and a fellow can move without such a thundering slosh in his boots, we must explore the land. We will have to exercise our own judgment about the fellows there. If they seem to be going to make a stay, or a move in our direction, we may have to warp right in, and wipe them out. Of course there is a bare prospect of their being adventurers like ourselves—and then I wouldn't trust them too much. But it is more likely that they are some of these cave-dwelling, or cliff-dwelling Indians. They would stick a man up to toast as a matter of religious duty. And if it should turn out to be an outpost of the King of the Camels, and they could take possession of us, I guess we would be no better off than we were when in the drink. Are you sure you are up to the mark for a tussle with them, if it comes to that? For a dead man you have come to life a little quicker than I could have hoped for."

"Arrah, now, quit your foolin'. It's riddy ye'll foinde me whin Oi'm naded; but it's in bid Oi wa'd loike to be av it wor all the same. Only as me head's none av the cl'arest, ye had better do the thinkin' for both."

"As I always do. I guess you will hold your end up, and I'll book myself for an extra lift at mine. Now, come on. We will see who are our neighbors."

Though there was a light ahead to give them some sort of an idea as to their course, the progress of the two men was slow, and not unattended with danger. Every foot of the way had to be carefully felt, lest they should take another tumble into the angry stream. And all the time they were careful to make no noise that might betray their presence. Secure as the place might seem, Armstrong had no doubt that there was some one on the watch.

It was well that they advanced with caution. Just when Armstrong halted, at seeing that a human figure was passing between him and the fire, the whole camp sprang into activity and life. They could hear voices speaking in some unknown tongue, and could see half a dozen men gathering up their effects. Early as it was, they were about to begin their march.

It seemed strange that any one would risk traveling along the narrow footpath in the dark, though it could be done by one who knew the way, and these men showed that they were well acquainted with it. Besides, daylight was coming fast. It would not be long before the slanting rays of sunshine would begin to struggle down into the canyon.

At the spot where the encampment had been made there was a bend in the course of the river, and at one time, or a thousand times, a chamber had been formed in the angle of rock that overhung the stream. In this hollow a dozen men or more could easily find room to lie down, and be sheltered by the natural roof above them. The little party that had spent the night there left their fire burning, and so it was easy for the two to see what sort of a place it was. They moved in almost at the moment that the others moved out, for it did not take long for the flitting figures to vanish; but before they went, Jack touched his man lightly on the shoulder and whispered:

"As good as wheat, Barney. They belong to the man with the camels, and it's big odds that they are on their way home. I begin to see a little light. Keep cool and quiet, and when the time comes we will follow them in. The road may seem a little dreary, but we'll get there all the same."

CHAPTER XVII.

DRACO LEADS THE WAY.

ONCE in the niche Jack halted. It did not seem likely that he could lose the trail of the party in front, even if he did allow them to get a start of him; and he wanted to see if there was any path hereabouts that led to the upper world, and to examine the camping-ground for signs that might show who he had ahead of him.

The fire was already expiring, but there was one piece of resinous wood, that looked as though it had been intended for a torch, which he succeeded in bringing once more into a blaze. By this light he began to explore. He found no trace of a way out of the canyon, while he became reasonably certain that this party had come down on the narrow roadway along the sunken stream. Of course, they might have descended anywhere by means of ropes, but Jack suspected that he had lit on the trail to the place he was going, that could be followed without danger of death from lack of water. It might be a roundabout one, but it would be safer than the one across the desert, unless on the back of a camel.

Satisfied of this, and believing that the men in front had the same destination as himself, he saw nothing better to do than to follow at a safe distance, keeping carefully out of their

sight for fear of being forced into a difficulty. Not that he was afraid of these men, six to one though they were, but it would not be the best of recommendations to his majesty of the camels to slaughter a dozen of his subjects on the way to his domain.

In addition, both Barney and his master needed a rest, if it was only for an hour. They had been going until even their strong muscles began to grow weary. And in a little while it would be daylight, when they could follow with a great deal more comfort to themselves, even if the chance of discovery was increased. Draco was not visible, and the supposition was that she had followed on after the men they had seen leaving the spot. If it had not been for her they could have rested in comfort. Though she might be an old friend, it was more likely that if she was seen she would put the enemy on guard, if not bring them back. Mr. Armstrong breathed a fervent wish that she might be circumspect as he dropped down on the hard rock, at the side of the fire that was by this time in the last stages of exhaustion. That was to himself. To Barney he added aloud:

"Give me half an hour and I will do the same for you. After that we will take our breakfast in our hands and go munching along."

Then he closed his eyes without further ceremony, and went to sleep, regardless of the danger.

In his turn Barney had half an hour's rest; and then they were both ready for business. They started out on the trail with renewed energy, and as the daylight was struggling down into the gloomy canyon, after a subdued fashion, they had no more fears of landing in the rapids that they could now see sweeping by.

By this time they had become so accustomed to the distant roaring of the cataract, that they hardly noticed it until they came unexpectedly to the very spot where the water went down a sheer hundred feet. Then Barney shivered in spite of himself at the thought of what might have happened but for the unexpected presence in the canyon of the men who had lit the fire, and thus enabled them to see a way out of the rapids. As for Mr. Armstrong, he was too much taken up with the view to think of anything else. The pathway—for such it seemed—ran along down in a tolerably easy slope, and he would not have liked to swear that it was more the work of man than of nature. It was not that which he was considering. When his eye wandered a little further he saw that the overhanging walls came more and more together, until they seemed to meet, forming a low arch, into which the waters leaped with a mad plunge, and were lost in the dark cavern beyond.

A very strange and a very terrible picture did the scene present, and Mr. Armstrong, who had an artist's eye, gave a minute or two to its examination before he considered how this sudden stoppage of the way was to affect him.

That the pathway they were traveling came to a sudden ending in the wall of rock he saw before him was beyond question. It led right on down that far, and there was no possible way in which it could go any further.

This being the case, what had become of the party in their front? He had kept a sharp lookout all the way along for any practicable way out of the canyon, and had noted that the ascent seemed more difficult than ever. It was not likely that they had disappeared in an upward direction. Which way had they gone? Perhaps closer inspection might bring a revelation; but Armstrong scented a puzzle.

While he looked downward he saw the tiger once more put in an appearance. She climbed slowly up over the edge of the bank, as though she had found her way down to the water's edge, and had not liked the prospect. She turned around and looked downward at the current, and then cast a backward glance over her shoulder at Mr. Armstrong. It was a plain invitation to come and see, and Gentle Jack went.

"So it's here you are, old lady," he said, as he came near, having reached the spot without a particle of trouble.

"I thought you had gone over into the drink along with the rest of them. Where are they? and how are we to get out of this? It may be well enough for you, as you are in no great hurry, and have a couple of good square meals in sight; but as time is pressing, and we don't fancy tiger-steak a particle, we would like to know something about the way out. It surely can't be down that way, so there is no use in casting such longing glances thitherward."

Draco said nothing. She had her own ideas about the matter; and they did not agree with those of Mr. Armstrong. While he stood there, looking at her as though waiting for an answer, the animal gave a sudden plunge into the rapids, and was swept away in an instant. As she disappeared under the arch her head was turned down the stream, and she was swimming fearlessly.

"I think that must settle it. The man went down there not long ago, and the tiger is bound to follow him. As far as I can see there is nothing better for us to do than to chip in on the same game. What do you say, Barney? Are you

willing to take the dive? Everything goes, don't you know; and it's all for fun."

"Av ye go foorst there's nothin' lift me but to folly. An' av we don't sthrike anither watherfall it can't be so much worrse than stayin' here. L'ade the way, an' Barney Kane will be wid ye av it takes him through the gates av glory."

"I don't think that Draco will go very far wrong, and I count myself able to go anywhere that a tiger can. Here goes!"

"Wan minnit!" exclaimed Kane, hastily reaching out his hand.

"There's no great roosch, an' nothin' can be lost prospicthin' a little, an' whin we do go Oi want yer fist inside av moine, so as to be sure we go together. Put yer paw in moine, Misther Armstrong, an' say there's no other way, an' Oi will go wid ye regardless."

"I can't say that there is no other way, because I don't know. Perhaps if we were to take the back track for a few hundred miles we might strike a road out of this, but meantime it wouldn't be a very cheerful walk; and there would be the chance of starving along the way. I don't think we could reach the rope where we tried to let ourselves down, and if we did, and reached the upper world you can imagine how we would come out without the horses that carried us over the desert yesterday. This seems to be the outlet. Those gentlemen in front knew what they were doing when they took it; and the tiger was not altogether ignorant of what is below. I don't yearn for it, but we are in for the war, and as there is nothing better to try we will shoot the rapids. Here is my fist; and—"

"But, av we get there what will we foinde? Fa'th, an' Oi begin to think, will the fun pay for the pleasure?"

"You will find me there, Barney; which ought to be enough to satisfy you if you are a reasonable human creature. In addition, there is a chance to find a quantity of treasure which has been estimated somewhere in the hundred millions. I can't promise that you can get your hands into it up to the elbows; but one would risk a good deal to even see a treasure like that. And then there is the woman in the distance. I have taken a strong interest in Miss Winter, and as I am now sure that she has gone in this direction I certainly shall not desert her. It appears to me that you are beginning to exhibit an unnecessary amount of caution. If you feel any fears as to the result you had better turn back and let me go on alone."

"Much good would that do me now. Here is me hand. As you wor a-sayin'?"

"Here we go!"

Once more, and this time together, the two men dropped into the torrent. It caught them, swung them together and then dashed them apart. It whirled them around until they were giddy; it tossed them here and there with a force and a fury they had not suspected; and finally, when almost beyond thought or fear, hurried them away into the utter darkness of the channel between and under the rocks.

CHAPTER XVIII.

VASHTI'S TENDER MERCY.

WITH Zillah by her side Magdalena walked slowly back to the apartment in which she had awakened to life on the oasis. Without, there was much or little to be seen, according as she was in the humor for it. Just now she was more in the humor for looking at herself, and considering the chances of her own position.

So far she had said but little to the prince of this realm to indicate her intentions. She had tried to keep them to herself until the time came for action, and though he had said some things that surprised her, it was only lately that she began to think that he might understand what she thought as well as herself—and perhaps, with his inside knowledge, a trifle better. A very singular man he certainly was, and one more to be feared than she had dreamed of when she was first struck with the idea of visiting his realm. Before venturing on any move she would have to satisfy herself that she was not always under his eye, whether he was present or absent; and whether her mind was really as open a book to him as it seemed.

Once more in her room she threw herself on a couch, and with a motion directed Zillah to take a seat on an ottoman, in front of her.

As the girl sunk down on the designated spot, they heard without a dull boom, like the distant roar of a cannon. Magdalena looked at her servitor inquiringly:

"It is the gun for the evening. When the sun sets it is always fired, and again at daybreak. Between those two guns the palace is closed. Save by the hand of the king no one can go in or out. The bolts that are turned I have never seen, nor has any one else but the master. They are there, though; and when they are shot an army could not reach him."

"Nor could an army break its way out, I suppose. A pleasant position it would be for the rest of us if anything were to happen to him. Should he die what would become of us?"

Zillah shrugged her shoulders, and shook her head. There were no words on her tongue that

could explain her thoughts so well as the motions; though she added, after a brief hesitation:

"This stone palace is like a tomb. It holds all within it until they are summoned forth. Look around! No daylight enters here. It is a gilded dungeon, and all save one that are between its walls are its prisoners. Oh, I would sooner be dead, yet have not had the courage to bring the end I have so often yearned for. When you have been here as long as I, will you feel as I have felt?"

The girl spoke wildly, but without surprising Miss Winter. The latter, indeed, was expecting some such outburst, since she was endeavoring to induce her to speak with freedom by all the will power that she had at her command. The words once spoken, Magdalena softly placed her hand on the head of the other.

"There. It is enough. I understand how you feel. You have made me your confidante, which is more than I could have asked at such short notice. Be careful to let no one know that you have so spoken to me. Perhaps, some day, I may be able to help you—to save you. These are strange things I am learning here; but if a will of iron and a courage that nothing can daunt, can help me, I will soon be a high priestess in these mysteries, and able to hold my own with the worst. Who is Vashti?"

The abrupt question did not at all discomfit the girl. Without hesitation she answered:

"My mother."

Magdalena had expected no such response, but she showed no surprise.

"Your mother! You do not resemble her. Does she too feel the servitude so galling? How did she and you come here, and what is it that is in common between her and the man I must believe that you hate?"

"She aids him in his work. That much she has told me. What that work is I am not so sure. I can only guess. There is magic in it, I believe; and one day, I think, she expects that it will bring her wealth and power. For those things men and women have bartered their souls all the world over. I do not mean that she is doing so; and yet, what good can come of having aught to do with the King of the Camels?"

"She is a strange woman. If I do not use harsher words it is because you have claimed her as your mother. Has she always handled those dangerous pets of hers?"

"Always—as long as I can remember. She has said that it was a gift. Nothing venomous will harm her; and when she talks to the snakes it seems as though they really understand her. With a word and a movement of her hand she can direct their motions. There are other things that she can do—things that neither you nor I can understand. Before we came here—when I was a little girl—she was a witch. Then she made much money. She could tell the past, the present and the future. If a vein of metal ran ever so deep beneath the ground she could see it, and her share of the fortunes she found should have given us enough and to spare. It was an evil hour when she met the King of the Camels, and came with him to search for—"

She ceased speaking abruptly, and as though a hand had been suddenly placed across her mouth. It was strange; but Magdalena understood, or believed that she did.

"They are listening to us, are they? It is time to cease speaking, though it can do no harm for them to know what it is that I have heard. Perhaps, some day, you will not be quite so willing a subject, and then it will take more than a thought to close your lips."

There was no answer. Zillah remained crouched on the ottoman, her eyes staring straight forward into vacancy. She would not have heard the evening gun, if it had been fired at her back.

Magdalena waited a while to see if the strange spell would wear off.

Nothing of the kind. The girl continued motionless, and the moments wore on. After a while, as if tired and desirous of sleep, Magdalena threw herself upon her bed, and covered her face with her arm. When she had lain this way for a long time, and appeared to be in the deepest of slumbers, Zillah rose slowly up and moved away without ever looking around her. When she reached the wall a door opened, that Miss Winter had not yet seen, and she passed out of sight.

The door did not close again; at least, if it did there was no sound such as announced its opening. Was this an oversight? or was it a trap to catch the prisoner? Magdalena did not long debate the questions, but, after waiting a few moments, and hearing nothing further, arose, and quietly followed. She did not greatly expect to be able to see anything more of Zillah, but there was a chance to explore somewhat, and she intended to allow no such chances to be thrown away.

If she had been intending to find her way about the building she would have failed most signally, since she stepped into a labyrinth of passages, that offered no suggestion whither they might lead; and Zillah was no longer in sight. As Magdalena was wandering at random her footsteps turned naturally in the very direction she would have had them go. After several

turnings in the narrow passage that she followed she was stopped by a curtain, and uncertain of what might be on the other side of it, she stopped and listened.

First, there was the sound of a closing door at some distance. After that she heard voices just beyond.

The King of the Camels was there, and he was speaking to Vashti.

"Nonsense! The girl yielded to my power the moment the spell was fairly on Zillah. There was a struggle, of course; but it was a yielding one. She threw herself down to rest, as she supposed, and from that moment knew no more. I called Zillah that you might question her in regard to the men who are on the way hither. It does not seem possible for mortal, on foot and unguided, to find the way, but this is a man who always succeeds. I must know more of him. And somehow, of late Zillah does not answer as readily to my questioning as she once did. Have you as much influence and power as ever?"

"Pooh! Zillah is a child, who has no will of her own. Yours is too strong for hers. When under your hands you allow her to lean too much on you for guidance. By and by she will see only what you will tell her to see, and what you think she ought to see. After that she will be worthless—to you, at least. Best to leave her in my hands. And this other girl! Why have you brought her here? I scent danger. Whatever may be your object in regard to her will fail; and in the failure who knows what harm may come? Better to have left her to die on the desert. Better turn her adrift now, before the mischief is done. If she stays within these walls I will not answer for what may happen to her."

"You fear her, then?" asked the king with a sneer.

"I do not fear her, but I hate her; and I care not to give her opportunity to work mischief. She is not needed here. Let her go; or let her die."

"I understand. You see that through her I can come at the hidden things that have been baffling you; and you are jealous accordingly. Do you not suppose that I have known all along that you were keeping something back? Am I a fool not to see that if you can you will reach the end alone? If you could you would slay me. Let the girl alone! I have said so, and I am ruler here."

CHAPTER XIX.

WHAT ZILLAH SAW.

THE listener behind the curtain was getting an inside view of things. It was pretty certain that there was no great amount of love lost between the two who were conversing. If she had not before been aware of the fact, Magdalena now knew that her dislike was reciprocated; and could appreciate the warning that the King of the Camels had already given her.

It did not appear to affect Vashti particularly to hear a section of plain truth. She did not affirm nor did she deny the truth of the accusation of double-dealing; but the charge that she would seek his life if she dared, or could have a hope of taking it, she treated with scorn.

"I would kill you if I could! Why, man, as you stand here you are my mark in a dozen ways, if I chose to have you such. See! Here is Diamond. Death lurks in his fangs, and he is only too willing to spring."

From her breast she caught the serpent with which she had menaced Magdalena, and held it hissing over her head.

"If I loosened my hold he would glide to you and strike you of his own accord. If I flung him at you he would strike as he came, and you would fall. As I stand here I could open this hand and drop the vial that is between my other fingers. Against what would follow I am already armed, but for you there would be no escape. Oh, do not imagine that I and mine are under your power without some protection; or that if the time came to strike I could not slay. Be reasonable, man. We are to be partners in this great search—you a king, and I a queen. So long as you keep faith with me I can have no wish to harm you. If the time ever comes that I have lost all faith in you, be sure I will strike first, and as hard as I know how. Be warned. Now, let us to business."

"With all my heart. The thunder-storm has no doubt cleared off the air. Call in Zillah."

His courage was equal to hers, and if Magdalena had been able to see the speakers she might have noticed that his hand was at his waist as he spoke, and that there was a light in his eyes that boded no good to the woman if she pushed him too hard.

Vashti did not appear to notice the motion of his hand, or the threat that was in it. She knew well enough that she was of value, and that he would be slow to harm her; but she was not ready for the fight that might follow if she pressed her complaint about the prisoner. For the present she dropped the subject, and apparently fell in with his wishes. She fixed her eyes steadily upon the opposite wall, and beckoned with her finger as though there was some one there who could see the action. Then they were both silent until Zillah glided into the

room, and stood before her mother with bowed head and clasped hand.

"She is here, and willing to answer any questions that you may ask her through me. Speak! What is it that you wish to know?"

Vashti turned to the King of the Camels, and awaited his answer; which did not come at once. He was looking at the girl sharply. Something in her appearance had struck him as singular.

"What is the Winter girl doing, now?"

"I—do—not—know."

In a faltering way she answered; and the reply was a surprise to the pair. There was not the least doubt that Zillah was under clairvoyant control, and that she seemed perfectly willing to submit to the superior will, but for once her inward sight refused to follow the course her mother desired.

"But you must know," retorted Vashti, sharply.

"Come with me! You go out through the hidden door, you pass along the corridor. You are with me are you not?"

"I am with you, mother."

"You reach the room that you left, but a short time ago. The woman is there. You left her lying on the bed. Is she there now? What is she doing? Look, and tell me."

"I cannot tell," responded Zillah, speaking with more confidence.

"There is a curtain before my eyes, and she is behind the curtain. It may be that she sleeps; but I cannot see her. Ask me anything else and I can tell you, but now the room that I left is dark, and I cannot enter it."

"It is as I told you!" exclaimed Vashti angrily, turning to her companion.

"In another week she will be useless to you as a medium. It is your will that draws a curtain before her eyes."

"So much the more reason that I should have looked elsewhere for some one to aid us in our researches. When the girl whom you profess to hate has become thoroughly developed there will be no curtains before her eyes."

"Ha, ha! Have you learned no more than that under my teachings? She will never look into the hidden mysteries of the earth at your bidding. She has a will of her own. When she knows her own power—if she does not already—it will be for her to command, and for others to obey. It was a mistake to have brought Zillah within the range of her influence. She is the curtain that is before her eyes, and henceforth it may be that my girl will only see as she allows her. Fool! You had all that you could ask for, and in grasping for more you have lost what you had. Take her! She is in your hands. While the other is here I can do no more with her. Try your own hand."

Vashti now understood the meaning of the drawn curtain. There was a will set against her own, and it was a will that she could not override; at a distance, at least. Had she suspected that Magdalena was almost within reaching distance, and with clinched teeth, and outstretched hand, was bending all her energy toward guiding the mind of Zillah away from herself, she might have ended the struggle in some desperate way. Fortunately for the girl there was no suspicion of her absence from the room in which she had been impounded at the firing of the evening gun.

The man had asked his question at a venture, and was troubled in his own way. Had it not been for the air assumed by Vashti he might have begun an investigation that would have ended in the discovery of Magdalena. As it was, he turned upon Zillah with a determination to show his ally that, whether or not she had lost her power over their medium, he could still use her to accomplish his purposes.

"Zillah," he said, speaking in a low, sweet tone, "will you come with me?"

"Wherever you may go I will walk beside so long as you command me. Lead on."

"Come, then. We journey to the Northwest across the desert. We come to the great canyon, and the waters of the hidden stream. Look along the waters, and the path by the side of the waters, and tell me what you see."

"A moment. You are too fast for me. The men that you wish to inquire for are no longer there, in the canyon. They are nearer, much nearer, and will be here soon. They come as prisoners of war, yet it is at their own free will and desire. They are laughing as they go along, and one of them is singing a song."

An imprecation fell from the lips of the man of the camels.

"The one that sings the song is the Irishman, of course. How did he and his master escape from the canyon? The waterfall and the rapids should have turned them back, to wander for miles before they could reach the plain once more. They had no boat in which to shoot the rapids, and if they had they would never have dared risk the journey, or suspect that it could be made."

"Be silent or I cannot see plainly. I can tell all that happened, as it is written in the minds of the men. They came to the end of the way along the sunken river, and were puzzled. Then, when they thought to turn back, and explore for a path to reach the plain, so that they might go around the barrier before them, the tiger came

to their aid, and showed them that the way was forward. It sprang into the stream, and was swept away before their eyes.

"Then they clasped hands, and followed. The current seized them, and they were dashed this way and that, until they knew no more. If they had not received help they might have drifted on down the stream until they sunk."

"But in the eddy below the narrow passage through the rocks they were seen by the men who had landed some time before, and who had drawn their boat up on the broad shelf. These men saw the two floating and saved them. When they came back to life there was a question what was to be done with them. It was settled by the young man who was the leader of the two who declared that they would go along; that they could not be left behind; and that if there was any killing to be done he wanted to know, so that he could begin without loss of time. Killing it seemed like to be for a time; but the point was carried, and they are almost here now. The tiger comes with them too."

"And the master of the tiger—is he also of the party?"

When Zillah paused the man asked the question with some eagerness; but the girl once more hesitated, shook her head, and refused to answer.

"Look again. Look carefully. If he is with them, surely you would know him. Describe those that you see."

Without the least hesitation she described each and every man in the party, including Jack Armstrong and his man Barney. Of Desert Alf she could say nothing. It was uncertain whether he was with them.

"Strange. He must be there. Once before you saw him, and they are not the men to allow him to escape when he was once within their clutches. He would be the gem of the whole collection. What are the two prisoners saying now?"

"The man with the red hair is singing a song, and the others listen, as they plod along. It is a weary march, and he is in the best spirits of all."

"The other man thinks. Tell me of his thoughts."

"He is thinking of a woman, but there is a curtain before her face, so that I cannot see it. He never yet deserted a woman to whom he had pledged assistance; and he will not begin with her."

"Enough of that. You can tell me but little that I do not already know about them. Go with me to the spot where I led you last. Look around you. In which way shall we go? Can we find that for which we seek? Will it take long?"

"I am there. Go as you have been going. It is not far, though it may take a lifetime to reach it. That rests with yourself. I can tell you no more."

Zillah's voice faltered a little, and grew weaker. At last Vashti stepped forward and interfered.

"Enough for this time. There is some unseen influence at work. More questions will bring you no more knowledge, and might harm Zillah. At another time you may ask her more, and perhaps she will yet see clearer. For tonight, let her go."

"Enough, Zillah!" answered the King of the Camels, waving the girl away. "Go back to your couch."

CHAPTER XX.

MAGDALENA ASSISTS AT THE SEANCE.

ZILLA had played her part in the seance; and though she was still under the influence of the mesmerizers she heaved a sigh of relief at the order to retire, and moved without hesitation toward the curtained doorway, behind which Magdalena crouched.

Miss Winter knew that she was coming, and for a moment was uncertain what was the best for her to do. If the girl was still under clairvoyant influence, it was not likely that she would see her; but as that influence would no doubt be removed when the room was reached in which she was supposed to be, her absence might be noticed, and an alarm raised.

It was not through fear of anything that might happen to her at present that she dreaded discovery, but because she was unwilling that they should suspect how much information she had secured, and what an inside knowledge of the workings of the palace.

And then, there seemed a chance to learn much more; and she had already tested the power that she had gained over the girl. In another moment she had decided to take the risk of discovery for the sake of hearing yet more of this interview, which she was certain was by no means ended.

Zillah went past the figure that crouched to one side of the doorway without even a glance. To all around her she was entirely oblivious. She stepped like a sleep-walker, and was guided only by the impulse given her by the King of the Camels when he dismissed her. As she passed, Magdalena rose up to her full height, waved her hand after the slowly-moving girl, and whispered between her teeth:

"Be silent! Whatever you see, or fail to see, be silent until I bid you speak."

It was a venture, to be sure; but it could do no harm. Perhaps, when the influence of Vashti and the king was removed, hers would still remain.

The curtain had dropped to its place once more, after Zillah passed through; and cautiously Magdalena reapproached. When she had listened a little, she even ventured to move it slightly at the lower edge, and peer into the room.

Though she could see but a section of the apartment, the part that came within the range of her vision seemed to be fitted up after the strangest fashion she had ever seen or heard of. It was the throne-room of a king; it was the laboratory of a chemist, or metallurgist; it was the den of an astrologer and magician.

Almost opposite to her, on the other side of the large room, was a raised dais, in the center of which was a chair of state, that might easily be taken for a throne. In this reclined the King of the Camels, his chin supported on his palm, and his eyes half closed, as though he was lost in thought.

By his side there was a table on which lay half a dozen old-fashioned volumes, and a dozen rolls of manuscripts; while, pushed to one side, were vials, crucibles, and other items of a chemist's, or an alchemist's working utensils.

The platform was carpeted with tiger-skins, and on one corner stood Vashti, looking down upon the man with a sneer.

"Perhaps you will believe now?" she asked at length, as she saw he gave no sign of speaking, or thought of her presence.

"I have told you already that these people were all dangerous to you; and your own divination has showed you the same thing. Yet they come in spite of us; or are brought without rhyme or reason. Fate is against you, and you are helping fate. Why have you done so?"

"Because I have learned that the girl is fated to find that which is lost, and that the man with the tiger has the key to that which was hidden. Without them we have tried and have failed; with them we may at least hope for success. Meantime they must be held sacred from every harm. What are they against us? If we fear them, it is time for us to die."

"And these other two? Are they also sharers of the secret? Have they the key to the hidden treasures? and must we risk all to save their precious lives?"

"They may know more than we wot of; but I had no use for them. I would have let them alone had they not found the way—as they seem to find everything they are once started in search of. Now they are coming, they will find us prepared, and must take their places with the rest. They can labor if they are made to; and two more slaves will not come amiss."

"Better if you had the same fate for all four; better still if their funerals were set for to-morrow, and the bodies were ready. These are not like the others that are down below. Not one of them will ever be your servant. Not one but will be waiting for the chance to crush you. When you believe me I suppose it will be too late. If you are not already warned, what use for words of mine? I am tempted to leave you in your folly."

"That which is wisdom to us seems folly to the rest of the world. Are you losing your grip? Come, now. I can test this matter, here and now. This girl whom you so hate and fear has already yielded to my orders, and with each experience the subjugation will be more complete. We should be patient; but if nothing else will suit you I will risk all. If I do not prove that my judgment has been right she shall be turned over into your hands, to be treated as you wish. I am looking on her—shall I call her, and question her now?"

"Call her, if you think she will come."

The call that the King of the Camels made was not loud, but it seemed to be very deep. His face was turned in the direction of the room in which he believed Magdalena to be resting, and from the furrows on his brow he was throwing all his soul on the effort.

After that there was silence for a little; and then, just as the sneer upon the lips of Vashti was about to change into something more audible, the curtain was swept aside, and Magdalena entered.

She had seen Zillah under the mesmeric influence, and was at no loss as to how she should appear. Looking straight before her she slowly paced the floor until she came to the foot of the throne. Then she bowed her head, and in a low tone murmured:

"You have called me, and I have come."

Her hands were clasped tightly together, as though there might be some kind of a struggle going on within her; or as if she was acting under a strong mental protest.

But whether she came willingly or not, she was there; and the king looked up in triumph the moment she had spoken. Until that he seemed to fear to take his eyes from her lest his influence might be lost or weakened.

At the appearance, which was, by her, at least, unexpected enough, Vashti had given a

start of surprise. The girl had timed her presence so well that she came upon the scene at the exact moment she was due if she started when the call for her was made. Neither suspected she had heard with her ears the voice that was only intended to reach her soul. It was proof to them, beyond gainsay, that the king made no mistake when he boasted that she would be his willing assistant. For, if not, why was she there?

And it saved the girl from Vashti.

The king was pleased, but he wasted no time in saying so. Vashti might hear of this hereafter, but for the present he was more anxious to attend to the matters at hand. He bowed gravely as he spoke.

"It is well. We have need of thee. Is thy vision clear? Canst thou see below the ground as well as above it; and hear the voices from a distance?"

"I can see that which is not hidden beneath the curtain, be it near or far, be it above or below. Wherever thou canst go I can follow, but there are straits between which the wings of the soul cannot pass, and it will be vain to try to send me thither. If thou hast any orders for thy servant, name them and they will be obeyed."

"It is as well to try now as to wait for what will come none the slower. Thou knowest of the buried treasure for which I am searching?"

"As it is in thy mind, yes."

"But the treasure itself—where is it hidden?"

"The world is wide; and even the wings of thought take time to explore it."

"But canst thou not see it? Look around. It lies somewhere not far away. What are walls of rock, or a few yards of dirt to the eyes of the spirit?"

Magdalena shook her head gravely.

"Lead me in the path and I follow; but I cannot go on the way alone. Something tells me that thou art on the right road already; but I see not the road, nor the treasure beyond the end of it. It may be that there are those who are standing along the path, who cloud my vision and draw a curtain before my sight. Take me beyond them and my tongue may be loosened."

So much did she speak in the tones of Zillah that once Vashti, who had been thinking of something else, leaned forward with a start, as it flashed upon her that her daughter had come back. No wonder that neither doubted the completeness of his control.

"She speaks well," said the King of the Camels, looking up at the sorceress, with the air of one who had just learned something that was to his advantage.

"The divining rod has told us much, and marked out the only true path. To enter by that brings her to the score of toilers who are working in the solid rock that seemed to bar our progress. As yet she is an undeveloped medium though full of all promise. They may be the curtain beyond which she cannot see. I shall lead her to the spot where we lost the tracing of the old wall, and learn what she can see from there."

"More fool, you!" snapped Vashti, who was still in an unsatisfied frame of mind, though she knew not what to expect.

"I have warned you; now take your own course. Remember: I shall always strive to protect myself at whatever cost to others. Do not try me too far. Neither of us can well do without the other; but I have the less to lose."

"And I am willing to run all the risks."

"Run them, then. But take at least a little precaution. I like not this curtain business, of which the children speak. At my leisure I will learn more about it from Zillah. For the present it may be as well to imagine that there is some cheatery about it. There is no need for this girl to see whither she is going. If she is under your control you can guide her by your will. If she is not obedient to that the sooner her feet slip on the brink of one of those chasms by the way, the better it will be for all of us."

As she spoke, Vashti advanced, and flung a shawl over Magdalena's head, drawing it tightly around her neck, in a sudden, vicious fashion that was all a stern test of the reality of the seeming trance.

Magdalena stood the trial well. She neither shuddered, started, nor drew back. She simply reached out her hand and let it rest on the arm of the king, who had been drawing near, and stepped in time with him as he moved away.

CHAPTER XXI.

IN THE MINE.

THE few words of Vashti were a stronger warning than a thousand of threat or caution.

And Vashti was watching all the time. Had Magdalena given the least sign of understanding or fear, the fraud would have been apparent to her keen eyes.

But she neither wavered nor held back. She tried to believe that so long as her fingers touched the arm on which she rested she would be safe. Blindfolded though she was, she believed she could read the thoughts of the man beside her sufficiently well to guard herself, and she did not allow him to escape her. If he did

it would be time enough to halt, and awaken from the spell.

She did not altogether overestimate the influence of the fingers of a young woman, and a handsome woman, even on a man like this. She was the subject, and he the governor; and yet, insensibly to him, her influence was being established on a firmer basis than he suspected. Vashti, being a woman herself, and used to the wiles of the sex, understood, in part at least, but made no further objections. When they strode away she followed moodily, her hand resting upon the serpent that was now coiled in her bosom.

A faint glow of light came through the shawl that enveloped the head of the girl, but beyond that she could see nothing, and she stepped entirely by faith. Nevertheless, there was no hesitation in the steps that she planted firmly on the stone flooring of the corridors through which they passed.

After a time they came to a stone stairway. Before they had quite reached it Magdalena knew what was to be expected from the involuntary movement of her guide. When he prepared to take the first step she moved in unison with him, and Vashti, closely though she was watching, could see no hesitation or wait.

And so it went on. Chance had befriended her in that she happened to be on the safer side of the way, and she knew when they were passing the dangerous point of their journey by the slight, involuntary cowering of her leader.

After what seemed almost an age of wandering—though in reality the time spent was but a few minutes, or a quarter of an hour at the most—she felt that they were approaching the end. Once more they walked on the level, and sometimes she recognized the feel of the ground beneath her feet.

Sounds began to come to her ears, as of miners at work in the solid rock. There was the ring of steel on stone, and the duller noise of hammer-strokes. Once or twice there was the sound of a harsh human voice, but it was not often. The delvers wrought in silence.

If Magdalena wished to penetrate the innermost recesses of the kingdom she appeared to have achieved her heart's desire. Her guide halted, and stepped back. At a signal from him the work around them stopped, and he stood regarding her with curious glances.

And now the strangest part of the whole performance was to come. Up to this time Magdalena had been perfectly conscious of all around her that her senses could reach. She had started out to play a part, and she had played it to the life. At no time had she surrendered her will. During this time she knew what she wanted, and kept her mind steadily in that direction. But, since she had reached the end of her journey, and was in doubt how further to play her part, the strength that had sustained her began to fade away, and a shadow to settle over her, which she knew was the will of the King of the Camels.

Was it worth while to make a fight for it now? Hardly. For the present she could gain but little more with her senses ever so acute, and she was willing to accept that way out of the dilemma in which she found herself. Yet, before she lost her own consciousness, she made one effort for more knowledge. Without haste or concern she raised the shawl that covered her head, and took a long, steady look around her.

There was not much to see. They were in a tunnel, constructed with considerable mechanical skill. So far as she could see there was no chambering, but a long, low, arched passage, that stretched backward indefinitely, and that was lighted at short intervals by lamps that were hung overhead. Much of the tunnel was cut out of the rock, but here and there was a reach of timbering, showing that they had cut through the soil. Some men stood along the side of the passage, their heads bowed down, and their whole attitude that of men without hope. Not a face was upturned, and they might have been dead for all the notice they were taking of what was going on.

This Magdalena took in at a glance—she had time for no more. If she had hoped to recognize any face in the line she was doomed to disappointment. After that she knew nothing more until her eyes opened once more in the room that she began to call her own.

CHAPTER XXII.

ON THE RIGHT TRACK AT LAST.

AFTER the revelations of Zillah it is not necessary to explain how Mr. Armstrong and his friend fared in their journey through the rapids; and how it came that they were on the way for the desert home of the King of the Camels.

When Jack came to his senses, about the first thing he saw was Desert Alf as a prisoner. At his side was the tiger, looking about as unconcerned as usual. The captors appeared to be accustomed to such pets, and paid no particular attention to it. As Armstrong had not seen the meeting between man and beast he could not know of the neutrality which Alf had pledged in the name of Draco when the latter

made her appearance, a little in advance of the little sport.

"Keep her quiet," was the stern order. "If you don't, when she begins to growl we will begin to shoot; and we will shoot at you first."

"I will pledge my life that so long as she sees no bodily danger threatening me she will remain as gentle as a lamb. If you are not satisfied you will have us both to fight."

"Let it be at that, then. We have orders not to harm her unless she shows fight."

"I will guarantee that as long as I am quiet she will make no moan. And I am hardly the man to kick when you are taking me in the direction I want to go. Let the girl be and it will be the better for all hands around."

The spokesman nodded. After all, he was not much of a talker when a sign would do just as well. Then came Gentle Jack, and no more was said about the matter, though it was understood that Draco was on her good behavior.

When Armstrong had recovered somewhat from his plunge, and the things which had followed after the plunge, he saw that he was once more in company with the man with the tiger, and stared at him in a way that was not altogether friendly.

Alf did not appear ashamed, or conscious that there was something needing explanation. He took it for granted that Jack must know that it was all right. If not, everything could be explained at some future time, and meanwhile he did not care to confess that he had been caught napping on his post.

Armstrong was not as suspicious as he had been; and was willing to accept the position all around as belonging to the fortunes of war. He was sharp-sighted enough to see that Alf was a prisoner, like himself, and beyond that he was in no great hurry to know. From the man with the tiger he turned to the other men, who were a queer enough looking set.

American faces behind a mask, they seemed to have; and their costumes were those with which the reader has already become familiar. A fortune for a circus they might have been, they were not so outlandish-looking to a man who saw them for the first time.

But Jack was not particularly interested in clothing. Physiognomy was the line of study he preferred to engage in. Who were these fellows, and how did they all come to be in the service of the so-called king?

West of the mountains there was not a better man than Armstrong to read character from countenance, and it did not take him long to get the measures of this crowd. They were a wild, reckless set, who had been willing enough to accept of a nomadic life; and perhaps found it a needed refuge. No slaves were these; but men who of their own free will submitted to the strictest of discipline so long as they were on duty. No doubt they were well paid for their work, and then did it for the love of it. He did not remember any of the faces, but thought it quite likely that some of them, at least, knew him by reputation, after he had made the little speech reported by Zillah.

From that time on the three men were prisoners on parole, and were treated in a cool, off-hand sort of way which showed little fear that they would attempt an escape.

It was a rather toilsome march that followed, commencing as soon as Armstrong and Barney were able to take their places in the line. As none of the rest showed any inclination to talk with them Jack, and his man had elegant time to themselves. When there was otherwise silence Kane in a low voice enlivened his way with snatches of song.

The day waned away, and was nearly gone when they emerged from the canyon, and began the tramp over the reach of desert which still lay between them and their destination. When they halted, at last, in the oasis, with the old temple, and its flanking buildings looming gloomily through the darkness, Armstrong judged by the position of the stars that it could not be far off from daybreak.

There was some little consultation among the men, and then the prisoners were separated, each one being taken to a different place.

Gentle Jack was in his quietest humor, and said absolutely nothing when he was sternly bidden to follow the leader. He entered the bare little room that was pointed out to him, as though it was a welcome haven of rest, and threw himself down on the couch he found there without parley or hesitation.

Barney was not quite so easy in his mind as to what was in store for him; and when he found that he was to go further he began a vigorous protest. They cut that short without delay; the leader simply drawing a revolver and dropping it in line with the Irishman's head, tersely adding:

"Take your choice."

Barney's choice was made in an instant. He threw up his hands after the manner of a man who recognizes the drop as being on him, and marched away to the next building.

From the looks of things Kane concluded that there were two or three small rooms under the one roof, and that the one into which he passed, stooping as he went through the narrow doorway, was as near to a dungeon as anything they

could find. There was no window, the floor was of stone, and when he had taken three steps he found himself almost against the opposite wall.

"That will do for your quarters to-night; if you are living to-morrow the chief will let you know whether you are to have better or worse. You can bet you will get the one or the other. And remember, if you try to go prowling around you will find that the guard at your door will just shoot you dead, and be done with it. We have no great use for you. You are too intelligent to work; and haven't brains enough to be idle."

With which threats Mr. Kane was left to his own reflections; and they were none of the pleasantest.

"Sure, an' it's the blissid truth he's tellin'. They don't want me at all, at all; an' av Oi wor out av the way it's money it w'd be in their pockets. Av Oi could give Mr. Armstrong a hint av what they may be after doin' it's the better Oi w'd sh'ape. It's him that's the favorite, an' a worrud from him moight save me loife. But sure, he will be apt to give them a caution that he can't live widout his mon, an' they know whin he whispers it's as good as a shout. It's little Oi will be prowlin' 'round to-night. Och! the blissid sh'ape! Here goes; an' hurrah for what tours up in the mornin'!"

The balance of the night passed without interruption, and when Barney rubbed his eyes again the sunlight was drifting in through the open door. A guard had been there the night before, since Kane had heard his answer to the captain, as the latter passed out.

A guard was there now, though it was not the same man. If he had not spoken Barney would not have known the difference. The uniform of all these desert prowlers was the same, and they were so nearly alike in size that one man could hardly be told, by his appearance, from another.

But this man, hearing the prisoner make a slight noise, looked in. Seeing that he was awake, the joints of his tongue were slightly loosened.

"The top av the mournin' to ye; an' how does ye foind yerself this same blissid day? Av Oi had known ye wor a-comin' Oi w'd have had an extry matthrass put down, for fear ye w'd be after takin' cowl. Av ye f'ale any the worrse for yer noight's lodgin' it's a hot whisky punch Oi w'd advise."

"Pon me sowl to glory, but he's an Oirishman!" mentally exclaimed Barney, though outwardly he gave no show of having heard the bit of good-natured chaff.

"Av Oi knew where he wor from, Oi could count on one fri'nd in the camp. Lit him soak a whoile. It will not be long afore he shows his colors, an' thin Oi don't care a rap which soide av the oisland he comes from; he's moine, or there's no more good in a foine voice, an' the quillity to use it."

"An' av it wor a bite av bri'kfast Oi wor bringin' av ye, it's after atein' it ye w'd be thryin'?"

As Barney had not succumbed at the first attack, the guard approached him again at what he judged was the next most vulnerable point; and Kane responded with the nearest imitation he could command of Mr. Armstrong's driest tones:

"Perhaps."

"Thin wait a minnit an' ye shall say what the bist is that we have in the hotel. But don't be cutthin' up shoinies. It's a long range that me gun has, an' Oi am the holy therror, Oi am, to use it."

With this warning he hurried away. Really, it was much later in the morning than Barney had any idea of; and as he was chronically hungry, there was nothing in his appetite to give him a hint.

"They s'ame to be willin' to k'ape me a-grow-in'; an' av they're not cannibals, minny thanks to them for that same. But av Oi could think av a good song to be singin' whin he comes back, it's better that would be than a hape av dinner, an' lashin's av dhrink."

CHAPTER XXIII.

IRELAND FOR THE IRISH.

"Lit me say. Av it wor 'Peggy McGlural,' now, that Oi gave, it moight sbtroike his attin-tion; but after it wor over he would shmoile an' furgit. It must be somethin' pathriotic, an' av Oi don't hit the roight vein Oi am no jidge av shmall matthers. Thin it will be, come to me arrums, an' what Oi kin do, count on me for."

"Oi think Oi hear him comin'. First a varso av somethin' to attrahct his notice; thin for the ballad that will take him bald-headid. Sure, it's 'The Grane Flag at the Fore,' that Oi will be after givin' him."

The way to the air was open, and Barney was pretty sure that he could hear approaching footsteps. He rather expected that the man would pause on the outside and listen, to see if he could catch the prisoner in some forbidden trick. Without any preliminary tuning of pipes Kane struck up:

"Av Oi had the choice av a land for me birth, An' a shpot for me home on this woide, 'airthly ball."

Ye kin tell how Oi'd choose, be the twist av me eye—

It's Oirish Oi'd be, or nothin' at all.

The Oirish for f'htin', for blissin', an' prayin', The Oirish for dhrinkin', an' swearin', an' gall. For the makin' av love, or the makin' av widdies— On, it's Oirish Oi'd be, or nothin' at all."

The light footsteps outside had ceased, and Barney was pretty sure that he had caught his man. He broke off with a little laugh that had a tinge of bitterness in it—enough to show that there was a fly in the ointment somewhere, and that there was some drawback about being an Irishman. Then he went on, as though talking to himself:

"Sure, a grand thing it wor in the owld days, to be an Oirishman; whin all the b'yes wor princes, an' niver a faymale that wor liss than a duchiss. An' mebbe the day's not so far off as they dr'ame av, whin the owld toimes will come back. It's Oireland for the Oirish, an' hurrah for the gr'ane owld flag."

And then, after his best manner, Barney struck up the song that was to bewitch his countryman on guard.

"Sure, 'tis murther an' robbery so long as bin goin',

Eviction, an' roasin'; starvation an' all, That Oireland's quoite tired wid swearin' an' wapein'.

An' she's soilyntly waitin' to open the ball; Whin the sound av the bugle shall rally her thousinds

To foight for swate fraydom, and sittle the score; Sure 'tis thin there'll be glory, salvation, and vict'ry, Whin the grane flag is wavin' 'way up at the fore."

Our wrongs will be roightid, our childrin pr'ictid, An' absentee landlords be heard av no more, Whin the war-drum has soundid, the British bin poundid.

An' the grane flag is wavin' 'way up at the fore."

"An' whin that same blissid, grane flag is up at the fore, av Barney Kane's not there to say it ye may call him an *omadhaun*. Howly Moses! but it will be grand, whin the sound av the bugle—but howld on! Lit me thry the next varse. It's ringin' me ears so that Oi couldn' forgit it, av Oi wor d'id."

"Och 'tis dith er oppriasion's the lot of our nation, An' 'tis lit'le av ilse that the Sassanach l'aves; For a flash av pure manhood they chain us, or hang us,

An' they think they have made us a payple of slaves.

But wait till the hour whin our freemin are mustered, Whin they come to the riscue wid treasure galore,

Wid rifl's an' bayonits, wid cannon an' sabers, An' ther grane flag av Oireland 'way up at the fore,

Our wrongs will be roightid, our childrin pr'ictid, Our h'arth-stones be sacrid asiver wance more.

Whin the war-cry's bin shoutid, the British bin routid,

An' the grane flag is wavin' 'way up at the fore."

Barney was lying back on his couch, by this time, his head resting on the palms of his hands, which he had twisted back over his shoulders. There was a rapt enthusiasm in his face that showed how he had taken fire at his own suggestion, and he did not appear to notice the face at the door.

The guard had been caught, sure enough, and was listening as though he was afraid even to breathe lest he might lose part of the stirring ballad. There was a smile of battle on his face, and his fingers were working convulsively, as if he could almost feel them grasping at the Britisher's throat. Barney went on:

"An' 'tis thin it will be 'Misther Kane, this,' an' 'Misther Kane, that; an' it wor Misther Kane that come over from Ameriky, with all th' b'yes.' An' av there's a sthay-at-home on the s'ile ye may call me mither's ownly son a liar from 'way back. It's all together we'll begoin', an' a mighty howl we'll l'ave behind us whin the invasion sits sail:

"There wor niver a ruction, a row, revolution, From equator to poles, wheriver 'twor made, That an Oirishman hadn't to carry the banner, Or the Jim av the Ocean supply a brigade. Now the sound av the bugle will rally our thousinds, Wheriver they're scattered to Oireland they'll come.

They're done wid their foightin' the wars av an-

ther, Till they've throyed the oprissors a rifle at home. Our wrongs will be roightid, or our nation woiped out,

Whin we roise in our stringth to thry thim wance more; But manetoime we're prayin', it's not long delayin', Till the grane flag is floatin' 'way up at the fore."

The last notes of the song rolled away triumphantly, and the singer was silent, his eyes fixed on vacancy, his lips noiselessly moving, as if the thoughts within him were too deep for further utterance.

His listener was just as deeply affected. With a crash down went the breakfast, and over the threshold sprung the excited Irishman.

"Sure, it's me brither ye are, whoever ye are; an' whin the toime comes it's soide be soide we'll shtip in the ranks. Down wid the British; an' up wid the grane owld flag! Sing me that scond varse over ag'in. Thin Oi can doie happy

wid the thinkin' that ther's a grand day comin for Oireland. An' what in tear an' ages brung you out here?"

"Whist, now! Don't be shp'akin' so loud, loike, an' Oi'll be after tillin' ye all about it. Sure, it's for the good av the cause, av ye must know. An', mayhap, ye rickognoize that?"

And Barney made some mysterious signs, which the other looked at, open-mouthed, but shook his head, in signification of profound ignorance of their meaning.

"It's the third degree; but av ye niver have riz that far it's no matther. Av ye kin say me masther, the jeneral, in private, it's the same worruk he moight be givin' to ye. Whin the head center sint us here, it's little we thought to foinde a brither on the ground. Maybe you're on the same errand?"

Barney looked at his vis-a-vis suspiciously, as though he did not know whether he should have trusted him so far.

"It's little Oi know about the h'id center, away out here; but av it's onnything for Erin ye kin thrist Michael O'Rafferty to the lasht drip av his blood. Oi'me a mumber av the body-guard av the King av the Camels, an' for the most part an elegant toime do we have av it; but Oi wad haad in me risignation in a minnit av Oi wor wanthed at home. Sure, it's doyin' Oi am to know how the good cause is goin' on. Taste av that, an' thin till me the news from Erin."

He thrust a flask that was filled with whisky into the hand of Barney, and half-turned his head away, to allow his newly-made friend to drink at his leisure, and as much as he wanted to.

Of course Barney did not refuse. If he had been the greatest teetotaller in the world it would not have done to show it just then. When he removed the flask from his lips he had perceptibly lessened the contents.

"It's the roight sort, sure enough," said Kane, as he returned the vial, with a wistful look at its side.

"It takes hold av the inwards av a stharvin' mon wid the throe grip. An' av there's a bite av bri'kfast saved from the wrack, it's a bit Oi wad be after takin', to stay me inner mon whoile Oi till ye the news ye wor ashkin' for."

"Och, av ye don't moinde a little dirt, it's plinty we kin gather up. Oi sot it down as jintly as Oi could, but wid me blud a-boilin' wid the grand music av yer ballad, Oi couldn't be thinkin' much av atein' an' dhrinkin'."

On the best of terms the two gathered up the breakfast that had been put so hastily down, and while Barney satisfied what was really a vigorous appetite they had some conversation together, after the manner of two confidential friends of life-long standing.

As Barney had no respect for anything that was not connected with his own safety or Mr. Armstrong's interests, he had a marvelous tale at his tongue's end, and reeled it off to the satisfaction of his listener, who was thrilled through and through with the prospect of a grand expedition and a general invasion of England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales, at a no very distant time. What Barney and his master were doing on the desert at such a time the little Irishman did not so clearly explain; but he hinted that they were there in the nature of envoys plenipotentiary, seeking to contract an alliance with the "king." In default of that it was worth while to see if there were no treasures lying around loose, that might be made applicable to the fund that was being raised to supply the sinews of war for the excursionists.

"Sure, an' ye had better say av ye kin git the treasure foorst; an' thry yer hand on the masther afterwarde," said O'Rafferty, thoughtfully. "Oi don't belave he cares a rap for Oireland, though it's Oirish he is av Oi know a Paddy whin Oi say him. An' don't ye thrust him wan bit. Av he wor to say, 'off wid his head,' which most loikely he will, there's plinty wad grin to thry their hand at obeyin' the ordther. Oh, it's a bad lot av men they be, savin' thim that 'wor down in the moines, an' thim don't count."

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE SECRET OF AZTEC ALF.

As the king was invisible during the night, except when he made an unexpected grand round, or was summoned for some very important matter, the immediate disposition of the prisoners was of the most temporary character.

Aztec Alf, however, fared somewhat better than the rest. His quarters were more comfortable, and he was treated with a rough courtesy. His tiger went with him, and slept at the foot of his couch, all the time acting as docilely as a dog, and attracting no more attention.

And though the following day he was treated as a prisoner of state, and kept closely in his quarters, it was plain enough that no more harshness was to be used, for the present, than was necessary.

Time passed on, he scarcely knew how,

and when darkness came again he was led away by a couple of guards, who escorted him to the large building, which was known as the palace.

Alf had been very quiet all day, and now he went along without plaint or question. When he found himself alone in the throne-room, where Magdalena had been with the king and Vashti the evening before, he looked around with some curiosity but no nervousness. He was wise enough to understand that his captors were taking no risks, and that no present movement to escape, even if he wished to make one, could hope to succeed, and that if he attempted to pry into the secrets that were doubtless hidden there, he would not be long alone, and it would be all the worse for him.

Perhaps it was a trial, for just when he was growing tired and disgusted with the silence and gloom of the place, the King of the Camels made his appearance.

He came so quietly and suddenly that he was on his dais before Desert Alf noted his presence at all; but if he expected that Alf would show any surprise or trepidation in his presence he was mistaken. The man with the tiger—at a word he had caused the latter to remain quietly behind in the building where they had first located—remained as cold, as unimpassioned as ever. His eyes were fixed on vacancy, as they had been from the first, and it seemed doubtful if he had ever taken more than the first glance at all his curious surroundings.

"You are the man known as Aztec Alf," was the salutation of the king.

"I wish you would look me in the face while I am talking with you. I do not care to have you imitating the beast from which you have gained your second pseudonym. You are also known as the Man with a Tiger."

"You have hit it about right; though, if you had ever heard of me, you couldn't go very far wrong. What is it you wish? I don't suppose I have been brought here simply to be looked at. If you had not wanted something you would either have killed me outright in the send-off, or by this time I would have been put among your other victims."

"You are right. I have something I not only want, but require of you. But first let me tell you a little of your history, so that you can understand that it is no guess-work with me, but that I am going on certain information. After that it will rest with you whether you will be one of the luckiest, or the most miserable of men. I can make you one or the other."

"You can do neither. A man makes or unmakes his own happiness. What he cannot gain through his own efforts it is useless for any one else to think of supplying. There are no rewards you can give that would weigh a pinch of dust with me; and as to misery, what is it? Nothing that you can bring. I have my mind, and out of that I can gain all the pleasure or pain that I want. Torture me until my mind leaves me and it is no longer I that am suffering. Do your best or worst; it is nothing to me."

"You are a philosopher, I see; but I have before now cured men very speedily of the disease. You will believe me if I once take you in hand. But I did not bring you here to discuss your system. It may have been necessary to handle you a little roughly in the outset, but since then I hope you have been treated with sufficient tenderness. If not, make your complaint, and if, on investigation, it proves to have any justice in its foundation it will be very warm for some one—the man you point out to me."

"I have no complaint to make. I am in your hands. I came here for a purpose, and will execute it whether you are willing or not. You may aid me, or try to prevent. It is your apparent right to do either, as it seems good to you. I care not which you attempt. You are nothing to me except an expected obstacle. If you are in the road when the time comes I will brush you aside. If there is any warning to be done it may best come from me. So far, you have only been an aid; why should you make me your foe?"

"Precisely. Just what I don't want to do. Here is the whole thing in a nut-shell."

"A good many years ago, when you were a younger man than you are now—for in spite of the freshness of your face, and your

soft, springy step, you are no longer young—you got disgusted with life among civilized humanity. Of course there was a woman in the difficulty, and you abandoned her without a word of farewell, or an apparent particle of regret. I can't say that I blame you for having done so, since every man must be the judge of his own actions, and to my limited intelligence it seems as though, under the circumstances, I would have done the same thing. You went out into the desolate places, but you did not become a hermit, entirely. You fell in with certain Indians, who claimed to be the descendants of the original owners of this country. When you were not wandering over the desert you were with them. In course of time you became one of them to all intents and purposes and were initiated into their tribe, and shared their secrets. Is not this all the truth?"

"If not the truth it sounds very much like it. I did leave the woman who had professed to be my wife, though not without words or warning. I gave her entirely too many of them. If I had slain her when I first knew her as she was, my conscience would not now be reproaching me for the deed."

"With that I have nothing so do. I would have felt much the same way if I had been so unfortunate as to have had her for my wife."

"Among the other secrets of the tribe, and the priesthood, to both of which I believe you were admitted, was one in regard to a certain refuge in the desert, which could no longer be reached, save by the most roundabout and dangerous paths. Within the memory of man, several expeditions had started thither; but all of them ended in failure. You were interested in this story, legend only though it seemed to you, and though it was long before you were thoroughly trusted, yet in the end you learned the full secret. Right or wrong, they confided to you the history of the hidden treasure, that was to be found here; and if they told to you the truth, and you were allowed to wander at will, you could no doubt go directly to it. Or, if the ruins of time have covered it beyond present approach, you could give directions how it could be unearthed. You see that the rest of the tale you then heard is true; the treasure part cannot be doubted. You know the secret. I desire it. And what I desire I obtain; if not in one way, then in another. Can we come to terms; or must I wring the words out of you by torture and the lash? Do you want me for a friend, or for a foe? Consider your answer well, and take your time to speak. I can be patient, but I am not the kind of man to give the same chance twice."

"Truth, all of it; or nearly every word. I can guess how you gained your knowledge; and yet, if you were more than the most bungling of experimenters, you would have learned all when you heard the part, and would have no need of me. To do that is now too late. Whatever real secrets I have are shut up in my breast beyond your power to unlock them. They are doubly guarded; and waking or sleeping you will find that not only are my lips closed, but I have power to close those of others. What sort of man do you think I am that you ask me to betray the secrets of the altar? I could slay you for daring to suggest it."

"One moment. You have come here in search of the wife that you abandoned—or who abandoned you—so many years ago. How you learned that she was here I neither know nor care. She is of use to me, and if you persist in your denial, I shall still eventually find out your secret through her. But I am willing to make her my foe, if I can gain my end without her. I will promise to place her in your hands, to question as you like. More, I will guarantee that she answers you the truth, and the whole truth, in regard to whatever you may seek of her! What is treasure to you so long as you do not enjoy it? Think you that you will ever again have the same chance as now, even if you should escape from my hands, and win your way back over the desert? It is the chance of your lifetime; you are a fool if you do not take it."

"And a liar and a coward if I do. If report be true, there is more than you could carry away, with all your camels laden twice over, with gold, and silver, and precious jewels. Well, it may lie there and crumble along

with the rest of the world. What are such things to a nomad like me?"

"One more chance do I give you, and but one. Then I turn you over to the untender mercies of Vashti, to work on you her wicked will."

"Vashti—the woman who was once your wife—is nothing to you. You would never have gone a mile to find her. For herself, you would have driven her away if she had come to you. But you learned not long ago that she had a daughter, and that you were that daughter's father. That stirred up all the old evil, under the garb of a noble resolve. Such a woman as she was not fit to have in her hands the molding of an immortal soul. You thought you must find the child, and take her away from the woman who had nursed and cherished her through all her tender years of helplessness. You threw yourself on the trail, and by means best known to yourself discovered that the two had come to me in my kingdom. At least, you knew that Vashti had come hither. You made up your mind to follow her, to wring the truth from her, to take the child away—and if the treasure was still hidden, you would secretly find it and help yourself as liberally as circumstances would allow."

"Well, the girl is here; is in my hands. As yet she is young, innocent and beautiful. She is willing to call you father, and to follow you the wide world over. Do you want her, you know the price. If we do not come to terms now you will never find her again as she is at the present. I can prove to you that this is the truth if you doubt me. Your answer?"

For an instant the King of the Camels looked at his man with a triumphant glance. He was sure that he had him now.

Not a line in Aztec Alf's face changed under the scrutiny.

"It is this. There need be no war between us. Enjoy your treasure if you can find it; and if you do not unearth it you have secured enough already to satisfy any reasonable man. I care not to take these things from you; and if you use them well they may as well be in your hands as in those of another man. But keep those hands from me and mine. Touch my child if you dare! Your bolts and bars cannot hold me; your dungeons cannot confine me. If it is ever due, one day I will take such vengeance as will make even you shiver to think of. That is all. I came as you have said, to find my daughter. Give her to me, or dread the worst."

For answer the King of the Camels clapped his hands, and Vashti came through under the swinging curtains, the wreath of snakes around her, and her eyes glittering with a fierce light.

CHAPTER XXV.

A STRANGE MEETING.

THE King of the Camels had been standing at the edge of his dais while he conversed with Desert Alf. As Vashti appeared he folded his arms, took a step or two backward, and sunk on his throne-like seat, watching the two with the hungry eyes that the cruel rulers used to watch a pair of gladiators turned into the arena to do battle to the death.

Vashti moved forward with an easy, undulatory motion, that reminded one somewhat of her own snakes. A pace or two from Alf she halted, and stood in an attitude of angry anticipation, hissing out under her breath the words:

"It is you!"

"I, myself. It seems strange to look on my face once more; but it is the improbable which happens. You know my errand here, no doubt. How are you going to meet me?"

"Your errand? To rob me of my whelp! Yes. After all these years you dare at last to cross my path, and for such a purpose! Good! In my wildest dreams I never thought that my enemy would be delivered into my hand like this. What torture can I invent? How can I ever repay the debt I have been owing so long? You are in my hands at last!"

Her eyes flamed, as she spoke; her hands reached forward as if she would tear him even now; while her servants the snakes, threw up their heads all around her, and hissed their savage defiance

Aztec Alf smiled a little wearily.

"Such threats I heard in the past, when I was not as able to protect my head as I am now, but I am living yet. Besides, there is one little guarantee for my life that you do not think of; but it will be sufficient to protect me as long as you are not paramount here. I know the secret that yonder man would give his soul to have. When I die it dies with me. Judge whether, in spite of his threats, he will allow me to be slain?"

"Poor fool! He was but trifling with you. Had you yielded it would have been to be but betrayed. With all his wealth around us, what is your secret to us by the side of vengeance? And there is a sweeter way to reach it. Before Vashti is done with you you will howl it forth, if but in contempt of the thing that had brought you so much of agony. Never fear! You have been given into my hands. Let him beware who attempts to take you back again."

There was an air of triumph in her voice that told she was in deadly earnest in what she said. If she had looked at the king she would have seen the heavy frown with which he heard her words; and the suspicious gleam that followed it. He was not the kind that would brook divided sovereignty; and it seemed to him that Vashti was making a bid for silence on the part of this man, with whom, even at this minute, he would have been willing to come to terms for the sake of the secret to which he had so long been near, but which had so long eluded him.

Desert Alf, himself, showed less emotion. He spoke again, but it was, if anything, more coldly than ever.

"For all that I have come to see my daughter; to rescue her from you if she be worth it; to see that you ruin no more souls if you have ruined hers. You know of old what I can be. If any one is in danger it is you that should be trembling. How you wrecked my life, and how I took vengeance—or executed justice—on your guilty partner, you know. And yet I was fool enough to believe that the child, which had vanished when I returned, was dead. I took your word once—think you I will ever believe it again?"

"Are you mad? Or do you think I am at heart better than my words? The girl is beyond your reach. Were she to hear you she would not believe, or would curse you as the man who ruined the life of her mother. But never shall you see her. You are given over into my hand, and never will that hand unloose its gripe until it feels you grow cold beneath it."

"You tried to strangle me once—and failed. Is it worth your while to try the same game again? I half thought it my duty then to remove a monster out of the way of doing more harm. I may think it altogether so if tempted too hard. Take the warning. Give me my daughter and let me go."

Then you can remain here with your fitting ally, and wear your life out in searching, with all your black arts, for that which you will never find. Oh, I had no intention of seeing your face if I could reach my daughter without doing it, but I am glad now that we have met. There will never again be a doubt in my mind that I judged you too harshly, or that some time in the future you might repent of the wickedness you have worked in the past. Such as you have been you always will be: without mercy, and deserving of no pity. If you were not a coward at heart you would be one of the most dangerous things in all this world, since you would slay for the sake of slaying, and because the sight of misery is your favorite pleasure. That is all. I have said too much, perhaps, but it is such a treat to have you hear the truth, that when you gave me the chance I could not help but accept it. Now, be done with this folly. I can neither be driven or coaxed from my purpose. If you do not intend to yield to my demands, best it will be for you to make sure work with me. After this my lips are closed."

He ceased speaking, and drew his lips tightly together, while he stared into Vashti's face after a fashion that made her tremble with anger at his insolence. She had listened to him, all through, vainly striving to be as cool, outwardly at least. When her lips opened once more the simulation was over,

and she broke into a torrent of invective, lashing herself into a fury that was frightful to see. And at last she took a step forward, as she did so drawing from the back of her neck a broad-bladed knife, that might have been the best weapon of a desperado.

"When I want to bring death to one who has harmed me I usually send Diamond or one of his brothers on the errand. I will be more merciful with you. You shall die with your mouth closed after all. I acknowledge that you are a dangerous man—even that I am afraid of you. So much the worse for you. That you may have no chance to turn the tables, as you threatened to do, I had better make sure of you now. Die!"

The sudden change in voice and manner of Vashti did not deceive Alf. He had angered her beyond her powers of endurance, and she meant to slay. He knew of old how quick and deadly she could be, and braced himself inwardly for the coming stroke. He could slay her where she stood, but he did not care to do that save as a last resort. And her deadly pets, that clung hissing around her, made her an uncomfortable antagonist in anything like a hand-to-hand struggle.

And then, as his hand dropped into his pocket, and he threw his weight back on his left foot, something came floating between.

It was Zillah.

How much of this conversation she had heard she never revealed, but enough to give her an insight into the case. Fearlessly, and with a palm outstretched toward either of the two, she motioned them back and apart.

"Hold! I command you!" she exclaimed, in a voice that trembled with horror.

"Be vile as the vilest, but do not not this great sin in my presence. He is my father!"

At sight of the girl a flash of pleasure lit up the face of Aztec Alf. There were not many things that could move him, but this was one of the things that would. And yet he showed no surprise or alarm at her presence when he spoke.

"Thanks, daughter; you are all and more than I dreamed of. You have a heart. But stand aside. I am in no danger, though the woman was. If she had taken another step forward those teeth might have met in flesh and blood, and I doubt if I would have been the one to bid them open. See! Draco scents danger, and is crouching low."

He pointed with his hand, and the three followed the direction of his gestures.

The tiger was there. Though left behind when Desert Alf was summoned to the interview with the King of the Camels, she had followed in her own time, had tracked him thither, and entered unperceived by any one save her master. Her burning eyes were all the time fixed steadily on the woman, and while she listened her lips raised now and then, showing the rows of sharp, cruel fangs behind. As Vashti drew her knife and took one step forward, Draco's limbs quivered, and she opened wide her mouth. Another step and she would have sprung.

The king leaped from his reclining posture.

"Enough of this folly!" he exclaimed.

"This is no place for death and murder. Vashti, stand back! I command you! I have given him into your hands, but not to kill till all means are exhausted. Lucky for you that the girl came in time to call us to our senses. The tiger would have made short work of you; and if she failed in her spring the derring in his pocketed hand would have stopped you before you could have closed the gap between. Another time may do better; this is not your night on. I will send him to the dungeons, and before you meet him again you shall make up your mind of what he is most deserving. Now—aside! He will scarcely care to fight an army. If he does, I hold his life in my hands, and will see that none of my men are lost. What, ho!"

With the exclamation he clapped his hands twice together.

Without, there was the clang of firearms, and then six men, armed with rifles and bayonets, and pistols at their belts, came filing into the room.

CHAPTER XXVI. MAGDALENA'S MISSION.

As they entered the room the six men spread out to the right and the left until

they formed a line facing the man with a tiger.

Then, the six barrels dropped down into their palms with a ringing sound, and the six muzzles were ready to train on Aztec Alf at point-blank range.

"You know what to do," exclaimed the king.

"Away with him, and I will hold you responsible if he escapes. Shoot the tiger if it does not follow him peaceably enough. I would spare the animal if I could, but I run no great risks. Away with them!"

The guards had certainly received their instructions beforehand. The hammers went back, all along the line. The muzzles dropped level with Aztec Alf's waist, and they were only awaiting the order to fire. When that came it seemed likely that the storm of bullets would cut the man with the tiger in two. As for Draco—the king had her covered with his heavy revolver, and at the same time was doing his best to once more hypnotize the animal. Indeed, he seemed to have more interest in her than in her master.

His success was a pleasure, if not a surprise. The tail of the tiger ceased its undulations, her mouth closed, and she sunk down quietly, watching her master with peaceful, sleepy eyes.

The sharp orders of the king had not been so potent to call Vashti to her senses as had the appearance of Zillah.

How the girl had reached the spot, just when least wanted, she did not pause to conjecture. She knew that the less she saw of Aztec Alf the better it would be for her own interests, and everything but the desire to hurry her away was forgotten. She made a quick motion, that quieted her pets, and then turned to the girl, smoothing out of her face every trace of her late excitement. There was vexation but no great anger in her voice as she spoke.

"Foolish child! What are you doing here? How have you found your way to this spot, to which you should never have come. You have done mischief enough already, since you have interfered just when we were forcing a compliance with our reasonable demands. I can do no more, now; and will have to leave him in the hands of the king. Come with me. The man's life will be safe for the present, but I cannot answer for yours if you have angered the master. You must be kept out of sight until he forgets."

All this she hurriedly said, in the face of the address that the king was making, and finally caught her by the hand and led her away without the least resistance on her part. When the king and his troops took a hand in the affair, and there was an assurance that there was no immediate danger to the man if he yielded, Zillah understood that it was time for women to retire.

Aztec Alf paid no attention to their going. He promptly threw up his hands as he turned to the king.

"All right, gentlemen. I can see that the drop is on me, and as I don't think any great harm is intended there is no use to squirm. Draco and I will be on our good behavior until the next time. Lead off to your dungeons. I have already accomplished more than I had hoped to when I set out on my journey. I have seen my child, and as yet she is unharmed by her mother."

The king made a motion with his hand. Alf snapped his finger and thumb. That brought Draco to his heel; the guards closed up; and the room was cleared of all save the master, who listened for a time to the low jingle of arms in the distance, and the dropping steps that still sounded along the passages.

Then, he laughed strangely as he spoke to himself.

"He goes away like a little lamb, after all. Probably he is the more dangerous for that. I must watch him—or have a man at him that I can trust. He knows well his value, and will be apt to presume on it when he thinks the time has come. From the way the work has begun it may turn out that I am not to have a very comfortable time interviewing my caged visitors. All the same, I will make the grand rounds, and see how they feel. Perhaps I can find some consolation in calling on the charming Magdalena. She has been very acquiescent so far, and if she keeps in the mood it will be a relief after the

stormy scene with the man of the tiger. Yet, when I approach her, I hardly understand myself so well. If all signs do not fail it might be much easier to make her my slave than my queen—and if Vashti be right it would be far better that she be neither. Let the end show."

There was no laughter on his face now, and he went out thoughtfully, pacing slowly along the passages that led to the room where Magdalena slept.

As he neared the apartment he thought he heard the sound of lightly falling footsteps in the passage before him. When he stopped to listen he could hear no more of the sounds, and was almost led to believe that he had been mistaken. When he came to the door, and lingered a moment at the threshold, listening, he could hear the long low breathing of a sleeper within, and was satisfied that Magdalena was there, and had not been an observer of the scene in the room of the throne. Some such idea had struck him, at the time that he thought he heard the footsteps before him in the passage, and for more reasons than one he had not been pleased.

After a little, he knocked with his knuckles on the wall; and supplemented the muffled sound with a low call.

"Magdalena! Miss Winter!"

He was instantly answered. If the young lady had been slumbering she was certainly a light sleeper.

"Who is it? What do you want? Beware how you enter without permission. Where is Zillah?"

"Keep your firearms for more dangerous intruders—if there are any. It is I—the king. Zillah is with her mother, or was, a moment ago. May I come in? I have some things to say to you that you had better hear now. It may save you trouble about your future; and the sooner you hear them the sooner can you decide on the subject that is all-important to you."

"You may come in, but it is on your good behavior. Since I have been here I have found this a strange house, with things going on that I do not understand. Remember the warning I gave you in the outset. I will never be off my guard."

At the permission, the man drew aside the curtain and entered without answer.

Magdalena was reclining on what did duty for a lounge. The light from the alcove reached her, and showed that she was wide awake, and still clad in her Turkish costume. As her visitor came through the doorway she looked up at him carelessly, and motioned him to a seat a little distance away from her.

He shook his head, and remained standing, although he halted at her gesture. When both of them had remained silent for a moment he spoke.

"My family has increased of late, and I am interviewing them all to-night. I have just been talking to the fellow they call Aztec Alf, and as he has turned out the most unreasonable man in the world, I take you next in order, as I think I will find you with sense enough for both. Will you listen calmly to a little plain talk?"

"I can be no free agent in the matter. If you have made up your mind to say anything to me it will be said, whether I am willing or unwilling. I may as well give you the permission that you will take anyhow. Proceed. I shall not attempt to close my ears."

"I have been showing the tiger-man that I know pretty much all of his past; and, probably, a good deal of his future. I may as well set out by doing the same with you. Sooner or later you would want a conference with me, when you found that you could accomplish your objects in no other way. We will have it now, and be done with it. If there is any point in regard to which I may seem indefinite, question me; I assure you it will not be from want of knowledge. At what point in your life do you wish me to begin?"

"Please yourself. I have not asked you any questions in regard to it, and I do not suppose that what you say will make me any wiser."

"Don't be sarcastic. You are liable to meet with wisdom, even in the King of the Camels, who has made a success of life so far, and is just on the threshold of still more

startling discoveries, which will enable him to go out into the world and lord it almost as completely as he has done here. But let that rest for the present. It is of yourself that I would speak."

"You are the daughter, and the only child of the late John Winter. True, you have been masquerading under another name, but that seems to have deceived no one. As appears to be a common occurrence, there was trouble between your mother and father, and they separated. After that John Winter became a millionaire, and died, leaving his fortune to be fought over by the relatives, that always turn up in troops upon such occasions. If you could prove that the dead Winter had been lawfully your father, there would be no trouble in obtaining the fortune."

"Unfortunately, that is the one thing which you cannot do. That part of your story is very strange. Like most girls, young and handsome, you had a lover once, whom you trusted. Some years ago you placed in his hands for safe keeping all the papers which you had, that would now have a bearing on the subject. Most important of these was your mother's marriage certificate, and a letter from your father, which would furnish some very important information if you only had it."

"At the time you gave Harry Vernon these papers you had no idea of their true value; but as an attempt had been made to rob you of them, it appeared to you to be as well to place them where they could not be so easily reached."

"Shortly afterward, Vernon disappeared. He had gone on some railroad expedition to the South, and dropped out of sight without any one knowing why or when he went. Of course, your papers disappeared at the same time. Then, when you attempted to claim what you believed was your own, having heard for the first time certain facts which located the dead relation, certain other relations, who were already well forward in the race for the wealth of the family, had the kindness to attempt to provide permanent quarters for you. To spite them other relatives still, whose chances were not quite so good, took up your case, and determined to make you a thorn in somebody's side. In the midst of it all, you strangely and unexpectedly heard that your lover had been captured by a singular old fellow who lived down in the desert, and went by the name of the King of the Camels. It was suggested that he had use for his captives, as his number of subjects was limited; and as you had some money at your command you started to hunt up your lover and your papers at the same time. That, I believe, is a fair statement of the way things stand at present. You are here to find Harry Vernon. And upon finding him a fortune of a million seems to depend."

"You have told the story in outline as well as I could have done it myself, but there is something more at stake than wealth, or even the finding of Harry Vernon. It is the fair name of my mother. If you hold the papers of which you know I am in quest, name your price, I had thought to save at least a part of the fortune, but after all, what is it to me? Give me the papers and—and I will not haggle for the million. Give me the best bargain your soul will let you, and I ask no more."

CHAPTER XXVII.

MAGDALENA REJECTS A CROWN.

THE story as told by the king was so near to the truth that Magdalena could have no fault to find with it; and she had seen such strange things of late that she did not deem it worth while to ask him how he obtained his knowledge. It is true that, in an indistinct sort of way, it came across her mind that the man had learned of her existence from Harry Vernon, and what else could not be learned from him might have been discovered by the aid of the clairvoyance, in which he seemed such an expert. That he was after the fortune that should be hers she had no doubt, and the nearest to surprise that she felt was when he burst into a harsh laugh at her appeal.

"Do I look like a man who would bother himself over a paltry million? There is more than that lying around here in the building, that could be made of great use to

away, and I would be never the wiser. With my hands just ready to reach for a treasure that is countless, do you suppose I would risk all, had I no other reason for calling you here? Keep your wealth, if you can get it. I want none of it. I will even guarantee that you recover the fortune to the last dime, and have it for your own perpetual use if you will but listen to me. I swear to you that I want to deal honestly with you—that if I did not I would not have to bargain and dicker, since you are already mine by right of conquest. I am the king of this country—Magdalena, I want you to be the queen."

Was that all a stupendous jest? Magdalena looked at him to see.

There was nothing in his looks that indicated that he considered it a jest. He was perfectly cool about it. Too cool, perhaps; since there was not the ordinary nervousness of the lover when he urges the momentous question. And the covert threat was all the more alarming when she remembered that this man had a subtle power over body and soul.

Yet she took no time to consider, though she answered him slowly, and with a thoughtful air:

"I take your words as I hear them, and I answer as though I knew they were true. I want to be no queen. Sooner than live here to reign I would die. Between you and me there can be nothing in common, and were I to agree to your offer it would only be to find myself a slave at last. No! You have heard what I came for; give me that and let me go."

"I am not so generous as that. Anything and everything else you may have for the asking; but *you* are mine. I say it again. Do you suppose that I mean you to dwell here forever? The life is good enough for me, and for a time you would ask for no better if you once went heartily into its enjoyment; but you are young, and a woman. Sooner or later I know that you would yearn for something more."

"And you should have it. Through you I shall reach the great, hidden storehouse of treasure that is to what has already been found as the bucketful is to the drop. Then we will be ready to go back to the world for a season, until its hollowness and its sameness drives us home. With unlimited wealth is there a desire of your soul that could not be satisfied? See. I am offering you what few men have offered to the women they loved. Few, unless they were kings, indeed, had as much to offer. Be mine—of your own free will and accord, and—and you shall spend what and how you will."

The king spoke in a cool, argumentative sort of way but there could be no doubt about his being very much in earnest. And he certainly did not intend to fail in his suit. Magdalena felt that, and was careful. She would not hold out false hope, but she did not care to drive him to desperation if she could help it, until she saw a way of escape for herself. This man—was he old or young—had a terrible power in his hands, and no conscience at all. He was rather worse than Desert Alf's tiger, because he had never been tame at all.

"You think all this now, but the time will come when you will laugh at your folly. You have tasted of wealth already—have found enough to satisfy a man who could be satisfied; and yet you are mad for more. You are already wedded to the desire for wealth; what room is there for you to be wedded to me? And this other treasure you speak of—it has not yet been found—if it exists it is well hidden by those who knew their business. It may be the vain labor of a lifetime to search for it. I could be satisfied with my million; but you will have ever increasing desires, and after a little there will be no room for me in your thoughts."

"You are mistaken. I search for the hidden treasures of the ancient Aztecs because I consider them as part of my fortune. Beyond that I do not care to go. But without them there is still no reason why we should not have wealth without end. This temple stands on a mine of gold, and my serfs are bringing to me each day more than a dozen men could spend. It is slower, but it is just as sure. And any day they are liable to hit upon the vault where my researches tell me the untold treasures are lying—waiting for

you and for me. And with your honest aid I would only reach them a little the sooner. One day the curtain that seems to be before your eyes when their spiritual glances go in that direction may swing loosely, so that you may peer behind it, and tell me where to search. Oh, it is a grand prospect that is before you! Can you hesitate for a moment as to what your answer should be?"

"For several moments. Grand it might be if my eyes were not already filled with another. You forget that there is Harry Vernon."

Quite coolly did she mention the name, and very narrowly did she watch to see what was the effect upon him. Certainly, if he had killed the young man he would show it, now."

"Harry Vernon, indeed!" sneered the king.

"Will you give up the prospect of a life such as I offer you for the memory of a man who was false to you from the outset, and never loved a living thing so well as he did himself? If so, then you are not the woman I have taken you for. If only the memory of him stands between us I know well enough what the answer will be when you have once considered."

It was on her lips to tell him that even if Harry Vernon was ever so false or ever so true she was no longer certain that she cared for him, but a second thought warned her that she had better not. It might provoke questions that for the present she did not care to answer. And although she had firmly resolved that she would never again submit to his clairvoyant influence, there was a possibility that some day she would be in that hypnotic state when she would have to answer any of the questions that came into his mind. If he thought that she cared only for Vernon he would not be asking concerning any one else.

"It seems very sudden, this freak of yours; and I doubt if it will be more than a passing whim. Best for you to think over it a little longer. You do not want a heart-broken woman for your bride; or a woman who can have nothing in common with you in thoughts or wishes. Vashti would make you a more useful mate; and after her own style has more beauty than I. Why have you not turned your eyes thitherward?"

"Because Harry Vernon has found her very attractive; and I would not care to share her heart with one of my lieutenants. And partly because, though she is a useful woman, and has some beauty, she is not exactly a lovable woman when you come to know her as thoroughly as I do. It is a very good jest on your part, but one that will not bear repeating. Mention her name no more. Perhaps you now understand why she has hated you from the first; and why it was my interference only that saved your life?"

"I do not believe you!" exclaimed Magdalena, hot with surprise, and then with indignation at the clumsy trick that she was sure was being played.

"You have killed Harry Vernon, perhaps; that he could ever give his allegiance to that horror is too bald a falsehood for even a jealous woman to credit. If you hope to advance your suit by such methods you have made the mistake of your life. Leave me, and think the matter over. You know what it is that I desire, what it is that I have risked my life and all to gain. Perhaps, in your better moments you will be willing to aid me. If not, I can die. But I will never be your queen."

"At least, you speak calmly of the matter; and while you can be a reasonable human being I am altogether without hope. It may be better for you also to think over the offer I have made you. I am willing to give you one more day to decide. You have broken with your relatives, your lover is false; and henceforth you will be but a nameless waif, for whom there will be none to care. What better can you ask than to be the bride of a man with millions, whose wife, in other lands can rule or ruin as she may wish; or dwell here in the midst of every luxury that millions can buy?"

"So it may seem to you, and yet you are mistaken in everything. My lover is not false; my relatives will yet own me; there are those who believe in my name; and sooner or later I will be neither a waif, nor

nameless. You have nothing to offer me but bare wealth, and—yourself. The price is too small. I prefer to take my chances of the future."

"You want to shut your eyes and be done with it before I have convinced you. Do not be guilty of the folly. Remember that kings have other ways of wooing. You still cling to your faith in your lover. Very well. I will open your eyes. After that the rest may follow."

"You cannot prove what you say. I defy you to the test!" answered the girl, hotly. In her mind she really felt but little of the anger she put in her voice. She was not above a subterfuge to gain time, straightforward as she had decided to be with the man who sought her. And if Harry Vernon was living, as she began to believe was possible, there might yet be a chance to find him, and learn more of the fate of her papers. She knew well enough how desperate were the chances for success in the fight that she had begun.

"Wait, then, and the test shall be made," answered the king. "For to-night I say nothing more. When I come again it will be to convince you."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

GENTLE JACK FINDS HIS HEAD IN DANGER.

To an outsider the interview might not have seemed very satisfactory, but the king went away without showing any signs of disappointment. Magdalena had said no; but that does not always mean what the letters imply when spoken by a woman.

"She is young and beautiful," chuckled the king to himself.

"It is rather sudden to her, but from the moment that I first saw her picture I said that she would make me a fitting mate; and now I am more than ever sure of it. What courage she has! When I am playing the Grand Shah abroad what infinite credit she will do to my taste! She did seem suspiciously complaisant over the defection of her lover, and it really seems hardly worth the while to run the risks it would require to prove it to her. Vashti is not the woman to allow her 'sacred emotions' to be made a spectacle of. Of course, if she insists it can be done, but I doubt if she will. She wants her documentary evidence; and if she once knows that they are beyond Mr. Vernon's reach, as well as her own, she will have no more use for him. I wish I was certain that she had no greater interest in the man I am now going to see. They have met but once, yet these chance-meetings sometimes play the deuce with susceptible females; and the young man appears to have been desperately smitten. If he had not been he would scarcely have followed her here. We will see what we can learn from him; and how he likes the prospect before him."

Of course, he referred to Jack Armstrong, who was at that minute breathing fire and slaughter, and puzzling his brains how it would be best to open the campaign against the King of the Camels.

He had no plans laid beforehand, having simply determined in one way or another to reach the land of gold and mystery, and then let events determine. He intended to depart with all the portable wealth he could get his hands on, and with Miss Winter under his protection. So far he had seen nothing of any wealth, or of the young lady. On the other hand, he had moved, so far, entirely as others had pulled the strings, and a mighty uncomfortable time he had of it, with nothing to indicate when there would be a change for the better.

If Barney had been left with him, even, he might have felt a good deal more cheerful. Jack was not one of those men who can bear solitude without a murmur. His spirits might rise with danger, but it did not want to be danger of a lonely kind.

When he had been taken out of the room where he had rested the latter part of the first night, he was buoyant with the idea that he was about to undergo an examination. Instead of that he was simply transferred to a dungeon under the main building, where he was left to vegetate alone.

The longer he staid there, in the darkness, the madder he got; and by the time a man brought him his supper it was a very even thing that the prisoner did not brain him on appearance, and make his escape to the up-

per world. He restrained himself, however, having made up his mind to keep cool and quiet until he could learn what were the intentions regarding him. No change would be likely to be for the worse, and he had hopes that before long he would be put somewhere where he would have a fighting chance, and could learn something about Miss Winter. Until he knew what aid she required and where to look for her, it would be just as well not to make any supreme effort.

The King of the Camels came late, but he came at last. When a stream of light flooded the room, so that Jack looked up in a dazzled sort of way, the man was before him, regarding him in a fixed, steady sort of way that made Armstrong feel almost uncomfortable. And it took a good deal to make any impression on that young man.

"I see that you have arrived," said the king, with a nod that made him look much like other men, in spite of his foreign costume.

"I thought I had given you hint enough that it would be safer to turn back. If you did not choose to take it you will have to stand the consequences. I don't want you here; you couldn't and you wouldn't find your way back to an inhabitable country if I turned you loose; and altogether there seems to be but one way of solving the puzzle. The executioner to the court has a sharp ax, the block is ready, and to-morrow the best thing to do will be to chop off your head."

"I reckon you must be a little off of your base, old man," retorted Jack, quite coolly.

"In this country they don't chop off heads. When a man offers to take the contract they set him down as a rank, staring lunatic, and go to work on him accordingly. If you weren't a good bit more than a little crazy you wouldn't be letting on to Jack Armstrong that you had stolen his horses. After that it leaves him nothing to do but to engineer a necktie party, and send you the way of all horse-thieves. If you have any more such nonsense to say you had better say it slow, and mighty low. I might be tempted to climb all over you without giving the neighbors a chance to share in the fun. What in thunder do you want?"

"Perhaps I was going to make you the offer of an engagement as my private secretary; or hand you the portfolio of minister of war. If I was, you may be sure that I have no such intentions now. I have come to see what you look like. On that depends a good deal what disposition I will decide to make of you."

"I don't suppose if I was on my best behavior that I would appear to be a very valuable acquisition; and after the way I have been treated I feel savage enough to imagine I must look like a hyena. Say your say and get out of this. If I can get a good night's rest I may feel better in the morning, but just now I am not a comfortable man to deal with."

"And you are most sadly belieing your reputation. What do they call you Gentle Jack for? I don't think I ever had a prisoner of state who was as savage. There will be more satisfaction in taming that fiery spirit than I thought possible to get out of you. You have settled it. To-morrow we will begin the operation."

"It does me good to hear you say, to-morrow. That is a long ways off, and who knows what may happen between now and then? There may be a revolution for all I know. Anyhow, by that time I will be all rested up, and ready for business."

"Exactly. You are getting in the neighborhood of where I have been wanting you. What is that business? If it is really of importance we might look it over to-night. I asked you some time ago what you wanted here. Perhaps you will answer me now."

"An answer is something like a reason; a man hates to give one under certain circumstances, even on compulsion. Still, as I don't want to appear altogether unreasonable, I might say that, as a sport, with me everything goes, and it's all for fun. When they ran me out at Oro I thought I couldn't get myself into a much worse box and I would come down and investigate the stories I had heard about this singular section of the country. I have had it on my mind for a year, now, but never got time and conditions ex-

actly right before. As long as one has money I don't see any reason why we should both starve; and if there is any good thing going why should you have the whole of it? That is the story in a nut-shell. I am here on the make; and I don't calculate to go away empty handed."

Very frankly did the little sport reel off this story, which was the truth, but not the whole truth. He did not tell that Magdalena had happened to meet him after he had begun the march, and that the sight of her had decided him. But for meeting with her, and the little affair with Mr. Pet Parker, he might have been satisfied to jog along to Miguel's shanty and from that on down, southeast, by the beaten trail. There were spots in that direction where he might have plied his profession with pleasure and profit. The impudence of the speech did not appear to strike the king unfavorably. He laughed after a friendly sort of way as he answered:

"If you had come straight to me, without meeting any one on the way, and told me that, I would have believed you; would have thought you a man after my own heart; and given you a chance to get your share of whatever was going. If I was taking a partner I would know of but one man that would suit me any better than John Armstrong. Unfortunately, I cannot trust you. While you have given me a pretty straight statement of the way you came to start out on the trail for this spot—if you can call the way here a trail—you have not mentioned the young lady whom you fell in with before you had fully decided that you would go to the end at whatever cost. I am afraid if she raised her little finger it would be of more weight than my whole hand, filled though it might be with gold. You have thought to yourself that you had never deserted a woman to whom you had once pledged your assistance, and that you would not begin with her. Very well. Be as true to her as you want to; but make it a mental operation altogether. It will be as well that you do not see her again, and as she has the freedom of the camp until the hour arrives for our nuptials, it will be best to put you where her eyes will not be likely to fall upon you. As our limits above ground are somewhat circumscribed, and there would be danger otherwise of your some time meeting my promised wife, and annoying her with your proposals, the only thing to do is to put you below ground, and let you join the army of laborers that I have toiling for my interests. If you do not earn your board and clothes—which are neither of the expensive kind—the result will be what I suggested some time ago. Off will go your head."

"A heap of words, that, to say a little nonsense. I'll bet you a hundred you don't."

"Don't what?" growled the king.

"Don't marry the young lady; don't put me to work in your mines; and don't chop off my head."

"Taken. You will find it out in the morning; and that there is no joke about it, either. And your man will, of course, go with you. I can have no use for such firebrands anywhere else."

"And Aztec Alf, the man with the tiger? Does he go with us, too?"

"He is reserved for better things," responded the king, briefly, as he turned away.

CHAPTER XXIX.

MR. ARMSTRONG RUNS AWAY.

WHEN in a sporting vein Mr. Armstrong never refused a bet on anything; but by the time morning came he was almost willing to wish that he had not been so free with his offers.

There was something about this man who called himself a king, and who certainly exercised a royalty equal to that of others who were recognized by the world at large as the legitimate article, that puzzled him. Jack knew but little concerning mesmerism, and had not the opportunity for an inside view that Magdalena found. He could not understand this knowledge of not only his actions, but his thoughts, which had cropped out as much in the manner as in the words of the man of the camels. He would not have believed it possible that such things could be if he had not experienced them; and the

stories that he had heard were no longer the wildest of fiction.

Indeed, he was beginning to believe almost too much. It seemed to him that everything that had happened to him of late, even to the rising of the Vigilantes at Oro, had been specially ordered by this desert chieftain. He must have some special use for him, that was being developed after his own fashion.

If any other man had felt this way it is more than likely he would have begun to fear that fighting was of no use, and that the best plan would be to try to make terms with the lord paramount.

Mr. Armstrong felt just the other way. Here was somebody worth the fighting; and a chance for much booty in the end. Of course, the king was, after all, a land pirate, who had no more right to his kingdom than Jack had. He held it with a strong hand; and the man that had a stronger would have the better title. That was the way that Mr. Armstrong looked at it, anyway. And as the king had evidently come in for the purpose of aggravating him, and getting an excuse for sending him down into the mines, the sport began to think he had better not have played into his hand.

It was too late to worry over that, however. The morning was there, and before long he would know what was to be tried. In addition, he would see Barney, whose absence in this crisis of affairs was beginning to be tiresome.

The king had not thought it worth while to make any large detail to send him to his present quarters; but after the threat of the previous night all that was changed. There was not only the sound of one step on the stone flooring of the corridor that led to his dungeon—there were the sounds of many. When the door opened there was the same guard that had escorted Desert Alf from the throne room, and it looked just as determined. Their officer came into the room, attended by a boy with a lantern. He had a drawn revolver in his hand which he was careful to point with a certain aim at Mr. Armstrong's breast; while just outside the door the file of soldiers was ranged, handling their rifles after the way of men who mean business.

"Are you ready?" asked the officer of the guard.

He was an intelligent-looking fellow, though there were the marks of past dissipation on his face. It was not worth while to try to corrupt him now, though Jack mentally stored up his face in his memory, for future reference. He did not pretend not to understand the question.

"Of course. Always ready for what comes next. I have just had a square meal, and if the gentleman of the horse will make his appearance I will be ready to return thanks. I am not aware that anything else can be on the carpet, but if you think there is I am willing to go with you and see."

"Spoken like a man of sense. Allow me, if you please. In the promenade between the different localities we find that it is as well not to allow too much staring about. It interferes with the business in hand."

"Of course not," responded Armstrong, after the same gentle, subdued fashion, and allowed, with much meekness, the proposed bandage to be applied to his eyes. Then the officer took him by the arm and marched him off, three of the guard walking in front, and the rest in the rear.

Magdalena had gone over the same course, and blindfolded also. It was not to be supposed that he would have less nerve, though he did not receive the warning that she had done.

He found out, as he went along, that there were some dangerous places but he said nothing, and gave no evidence of being conscious of the fact when the lieutenant hugged a little closer to him, and guided his steps with a trifle more care.

No accident happened, and in course of time the bandage was removed from his head, and he had a chance to see the same sight at which Magdalena had been permitted a glance.

But this time there was no silence. Slowly, but steadily, fell the picks or the hammers, as each man bent to his task without a glance at the intruders. He could see that they were laboring on a tunnel, that was just

at this time being driven through the solid rock, and had no doubt that it was connected with the mining operations of the king. Was he going to assist in the labor? After laying a wager that he would not it was not very likely; but after his slight experience with the men who had him in charge he was not so sure that it was not worth while to give the question further consideration. Before he could do that he heard a noise in the distance; and from the first sound he was pretty certain that it could be nothing else than Barney, arriving with another contingent of the guard.

In the language of the times, he came a-whooping. He had been having no one to talk to for over half a day and he was improving the opportunity that had at last arrived to give his estimate of the King of the Camels and all his retainers. As Mr. O'Rafferty was not present he could give his tongue full liberty without injury to his prospects, and he had no hesitation about doing it.

When his eyes fell on Mr. Armstrong his flow of words ceased suddenly. In the presence of his superior he had nothing to say; and it was the idea that he was being forced away from him that made Barney so outrageous.

Nevertheless he had said enough, and the men who had charge of him were itching for a chance to take a little vengeance for the abuse they had been receiving. Certainly he had not bettered his chances for mild treatment, and Jack saw that with some concern. He would have preferred himself to be the central figure, as he generously imagined that Barney needed all the extra chances to escape; and it would be none the better for them if particular attention was to be given to the Irishman.

However, the time was at hand when he had to look out for himself, and decide promptly what course he was going to take. The officer of the guard approached a fellow soldier who, like himself, seemed to be in authority, and said a few words to him in an undertone, which did not reach Armstrong's ears. Then he pointed at the prisoners, and stepped back a pace or two, watching what followed with some curiosity. He had evidently received an inkling of what might follow, and was not at all sorry to be out of the mess himself.

The man who had the prisoners now in charge was of a different stripe. He was a rough, brutal-looking individual, who did not seem to have a single idea above being a slave-driver, and a very rough one at that. He swung around sullenly, and stared at Armstrong and his man with a cruel gaze.

"Treat 'em tenderly if they work, but make 'em work anyway? Eh? You bet I'll make 'em work, or know the reason why. Here, you! Here's a drill and a hammer. Let's see what you know about making a hole in a rock. One place is as good as another to begin at, and when I know what you can do I'll see where to put you in the gang. You don't look as though you were much good, but you little chaps are sometimes tough as nails, and if you turn out to be the right stripe you will be just the man I'm waiting for. The feller that had the place on the shift was played. Maybe you'll have the sand to stand it longer. Take hold, or you'll be learnin' a thing or two afore you're much older."

He kicked the tools that he had mentioned into sight, and then made a threatening step toward Armstrong.

"Pick 'em up an' git to work. We don't have no foolin' here."

"Not a bit of it," said Mr. Armstrong calmly, stooping, as if to pick up the tools. Then he raised himself up, and suddenly shot out his right from the shoulder.

If he tried to see how hard he could hit he must have found out. The blow took effect well up on the face, and sent the man flying back as if he had been struck with lightning. If his back had not landed against the rocky wall of the tunnel there is no telling where he would have gone to. As it was he remained for an instant propped up; then he quivered a little, and sunk in a heap.

Jack got in his work so quickly that a bystander could hardly have seen how it was done, if he had been watching ever so closely. The work that had been going on had never stopped, and though the officer of the guard

may have seen what had occurred he neither moved nor spoke, and no one else appeared to have understood what had happened.

"I think we are wanted elsewhere, Barney," said Jack as he straightened himself up after delivering the blow. Follow your leader!"

He darted at the fallen overseer, snatched a pair of revolvers from his belt, and dashed down the corridor followed by the little Irishman.

CHAPTER XXX.

MORE LUCK THAN JUDGMENT.

WHEN Mr. Armstrong took to flight he had no particular plan in view. He had said that he would not work and he did not intend to but he was just as averse to accepting the other horn of the dilemma, as proposed, the preceding evening, by the king. He had a pair of revolvers which ought to be in good working order, and he thought he could shoot around any man in the king's dominions; but that would not help him much if the army once got him in a corner. At the same time he hoped he could find a place where the fight could be made to better advantage.

The two scraped by everything that was in the way to stop them, without having to strike another blow. When they came to where a dark tunnel branched off from the one they were following they darted down it, with no idea whither it would lead. They turned aside just in time to avoid three or four men who were coming toward them, and if they had waited they might have seen that one of these men was the king himself.

Fortunately they were not seen, the men continuing straight on. It was not likely that they would have many minutes' grace; and when they had gone a few yards further Jack found that the passage came to an abrupt termination. Of course he had moderated his pace when they were once fairly lost in the darkness. If they had not done so some one would have been hurt against the rock that barred their way.

"A mighty foine place it is for prayer an' fastin', or aven for a foight wid the chances ag'in us; but Oi wad rather doie in the loight av the lanterns, av it wor all the same to the man wid the camils. Oi belave Oi will be afther goin' back. It's ownly a dozina men, all towld, that are there to have the ruction wid, an' whoy wouldn't it be a good toime to raise an insurrection."

"Steady, Barney," answered Armstrong, who was by no means despondent. "Take one of the these music-boxes in your fist, and then wait till we see what comes next. If we had only had the sixes in the start, so that we could have taken them by surprise, the insurrection idea would not have been a half bad one. But by the time I got on to them that infernal guard had begun to handle their muskets, and if they once tried to shoot it would have been all up with us. Some of them would have brought us, sure. And I don't know that it is a good thing to start out with wholesale slaughter, either. We couldn't have got at the right man. If I had a chance for a sitting shot at the king himself I don't know but what I would take it; but if we want to do anything for ourselves, in this infernal old hole, we must begin with him. He would just as soon as not sacrifice a dozen lives or more to smoke us out."

"Will, av me eyesight didn't desave me he's on the ground now, an' we'll soon hear frim him. It's monny thanks for the shootin'-oirn; but Oi would fale more comfortable av Oi had a bit av a sthick in me fist. Joost listen!"

Armstrong did listen, and he heard the voice of the King of the Camels, sharply raised, as he gave his orders. And as every order was coupled with a threat it was easy to be seen that he was in a horrible humor.

"Alive, now! Don't forget it. I must have the hounds alive!" he shouted, and the cry gave the two fugitives a great deal of satisfaction. It would do much toward crippling their pursuers. If it meant that, in the long run, they were to be sufferers, that did not count, so that the time was indefinitely postponed.

Nevertheless it was necessary to do something. In that bare little chamber they could be starved out without a particle of danger to any one; and it would not be long

before their presence there would be detected. They were just about dashing out again into the main passage, and trying that once more, when they heard a cautious whisper.

"Mr. Kane, av ye pl'aze! Barney, dear!" "It's O'Rafferty, sure as aigs," whispered Barney.

Then, as it struck him that Jack did not know who O'Rafferty was, he added:

"An' a friend av me own. Ye kin thrust him wid yer loife as long as he thinks ye wad foight the battles av Erin. Whist! Michael, me darlint, where wor ye?"

"It's here Oi am, at the risk av me loife, az ye wor sayin'. Ye must git out av this, soon az convenient, an' remimber it wor O'Rafferty saved ye. Folly me, an' shup loight az the fallin' dew. It's a wrinkle that Moichael knows that no wan sames to have got on to. Oi don't know where it lades to; but onny port will do in a bahd storrum."

As the two had not had a chance to relate what had befallen them during their separation, of course Jack did not understand the meaning of this; but he was satisfied that Barney knew what he was about, and was used to having him come out strong in emergencies. He fell into line without a word, and the three stole away.

For a moment they were in danger of being seen; and they were not certain but what they had been, for they could hear the sounds of the coming men much plainer, and as they glanced back over their shoulders they could see half a dozen of the guard at a run, with trailed rifles.

Fortunately they did not have more than a few steps to go in the main tunnel before they branched off again, darting into another dark and gloomy passage.

"Come on, now!" shouted O'Rafferty. "It's joost a bit funder, an' not a minnit to spare. An' here ye are at lasht."

Michael came to a sudden halt, and stooping, fumbled around for a little, while Jack stood at his shoulder, wishing that he would hurry, and wondering what was to come next.

"On yer han's an' knees wid ye, an' crawl through. Oi'll be goin' ahead, to say av Oi kin save mesilf, an' perhaps get ye a lantern. Av Oi can't, ye will joost have to wait in the darrukniss till Oi kin foinde the toime to come back ag'in. It's not out av this ye can be goin' for the prisint."

Of course it was a risk to run; but anything was a risk just now. Without wasting time in asking for explanations, Jack scrambled through what he could feel was a narrow passage, and Barney followed closely behind. Then O'Rafferty went away on tip-toe, and all was silence, so complete that the nerves of almost any man would set to tingling under the same circumstances.

Their friend was certainly willing to run great risks, for they had hardly become accustomed to the darkness, and began a whispered conversation, when he was back at the opening once more.

"It's here yez are wid the loight; but av ye are wise ye'll not be afther usin' it a bit more than ye nade. It's a long toime till Oi kin come ag'in widout the danger to all av us. It's a safe hoidin'-place ye'r in, that none av the b'yes know nothin' at all about, more belooke Oi found it mesilf, altogether be chance, an' it's wonderin' where it lades to, an' waitin' Oi am for the toime to foinde out. Luck go wid ye till we mate ag'in; an' hurrah for owld Oireland!"

With that he closed the rock that had moved away to admit his handing in the light, and the two were left to their own devices.

"What in the name of all that is wonderful can this have to do with old Ireland?" asked Jack, amused in spite of himself. "You have been playing some of your pranks on that gentleman, and I suppose, as usual, he will be calling on me before long for an explanation."

"Niver moinde the explanathion, av he ownly comes back to git it. Av onnything happins to him, it shroikes me we're in a moighty bad skimp. How wad we be afther gettin' out, an' the door shut?"

"True for you, Barney, but it's not worth while to worry about the chances until we begin to get hungry. Took Provillan! I had a breakfast that would last, at a pinch, for all day. Now then, give an account of

yourself, since I saw you last, and then we will figure up how the land lays, and how we are to get at the gentleman who is undoubtedly, by this time, after our scalps, full sail."

So they talked it all over, Barney relating how he had made a friend of O'Rafferty, and whatever information he had been able to pick up through him; and Jack giving an account of his interview with the king.

This was all very well in a way, as it enabled them to while some of the time away they had to wait, and lay many plans for future usefulness. But that time seemed to go terribly slow.

They were not yet desperate enough to start on an extended exploring expedition. If O'Rafferty came back they wanted to be where he could find them at once; and as there was no telling when they could get a light again if anything happened to Michael they were husbanding their oil too closely to allow of using the full blaze in trying to find a way out of the short corridor in which they were confined. They felt around the stone which had moved aside to admit them; but it was as solid as the rest of the wall, and they were almost inclined to believe that they had made a mistake.

"The fact is, Barney, it don't do to believe your eyesight around here, if the king has any interest in making you see false. The more I see and think about him the more I am inclined to think that he is a very singular man. Brace yourself up, and don't let him get his mental claws in your hair. If the door was wide open he would try to pull the wool down so that you couldn't see it. We will have to trust to luck, and O'Rafferty."

"To say nothin' av the glimmerin' av loight Oi can see forninst us. Av ye haven't obsarved it, mebbe it's a shpark frim that same king's eye, but to me it looks loike a bit av a lantern in the distance."

"Right you are," said Jack, turning until his eye fell upon the glimmer to which the Irishman alluded. It's a long ways off, but if we don't drop into a hole in the ground before we get there we'll see what it means."

CHAPTER XXXI.

"I HAVE FOUND IT."

THE King of the Camels had a stricter regard for truth in his interview with Magdalena than she had given him credit for; and he intended to convince her of the fact without any recourse to the peculiar powers which, on occasion, he exercised so lavishly.

It was not altogether easy to have Magdalena witness an interview between her false lover and Vashti, at least at any set time. The king had given himself twenty-four hours, however; and he was certain that within that time the two would meet somewhere. It was for him to make an opportunity which the others would take advantage of.

Magdalena was certain that she would recognize Harry—she still thought of him by that name—as far as she could see him; and she was just as certain that so far she had not laid eyes on him. It is true that her view of the toilers was a hurried and an indistinct one, but she was satisfied that he was not among those who were delving in the mine when she was taken thither by Vashti and the king. Of course, he was not in the party that had escorted her over the desert; and she did not believe that he was among the horsemen she had seen exercising on the plain. She had caught a glimpse of the guard that took Desert Alf away from the throne-room, and still did not find. Either he was a prisoner in one of the dungeons under the palace, or else he was a trusted man, who was away on business of the king.

In the latter conjecture she was right. The king had taken the precaution to send Vernon away until he found out how the land lay.

About the time that Gentle Jack was creating such confusion in the lower vaults and tunnels, Magdalena, accompanied by Zillah, was strolling aimlessly around the palace, and looking out over the desert in an abstracted way. She saw nothing, for a time, that attracted her attention, and it was a motion of Zillah, and a silent bending forward in an attitude of hesitation, that called her

attention to a speck in the distance. Some one was approaching; and of course most likely it was one, or some, of the servants of the king.

They watched for some little time, saying nothing. If Magdalena had known how much keener than her own was the sight of her companion she might have asked some questions; but she did not dream that at the distance the figures could be recognized, and as it would take some time before the slowly enlarging speck would resolve itself into anything tangible to her view she silently turned away when Zillah did. As, at that moment, she heard the sound of a bugle, she was led to believe that somewhere or other there were sentinels who had not been as quick as herself to perceive that some one approached.

The two went around the temple. By that time they were out of sight of the speck on the desert; and when they entered the building, and found their way to their room once more, Magdalena seemed to have forgotten all about it. The fact was Magdalena wanted to get rid of her companion; while Zillah was just as anxious to get away for a moment or two at the right time. The moment for that had not yet come, but she was preparing for it.

Magdalena had been unsuspicious; but, she was ceaselessly on the watch, and noted the change in the girl's demeanor. After a time she threw herself silently down; then yawned; and finally appeared to go to sleep. After watching for a while Zillah stole out of the room.

Magdalena was about to arise and follow when some one else came in.

It was the King of the Camels.

"If I am not widely mistaken I can give you the proof that I promised. Vernon has returned. By the hand of Zillah I have sent him word that I cannot hear his report for an hour. I am sure that she will also take him a message from Vashti. The woman has not seen him for some days, and no doubt has much to say. She thinks that I am below with the prisoners, and will seize the opportunity. Come with me. I will place you where everything can be overheard. After that you will be convinced."

Magdalena drew back.

"Even if I could hear that which you promise me I do not care to be an eavesdropper. What surety would I have that it was not all a delusion?"

"Be done with that folly. You mean that you fear to be convinced. I have your promise to accept the test; and I shall hold you to it, if not in one way, then in another. If you would sooner listen to them bound and gagged, so that you cannot warn them of your presence, give me a hint, and I will see that you are there."

"You are the stronger power and I suppose I must submit. Your wooing may not be gently done, but it is very much in earnest. I will follow you."

Even as she went Magdalena had the pleasurable feeling that she was deceiving him; and the satisfaction of being assured that he was not reading her thoughts. She accepted in silence the station he gave her, and awaited what was to come without more than ordinary nervousness. Being a woman, she hated Vashti most heartily in advance, for what she expected to see; and was inclined to believe that she could henceforth look at Harry Vernon with pity, perhaps; but certainly with no regret.

The palace was full of curtains. They draped what would otherwise have been bare, gloomy walls of stone, until they became gorgeous with their rich hangings. The drapery also afforded many opportunities to find secure hiding-places. From the one the king had provided, Miss Winter saw Vashti come first to the trysting-place.

The woman of the snakes seemed in haste, and not at all at her ease. She glanced around suspiciously; and if she had not feared to lose the time, might have examined, to see if there was a possibility for some lurker to be hiding near. She made a step toward the wall, and either by chance or instinct the step turned her face directly toward Magdalena. The latter had a clear view of her features, and examined them without fear or trembling. If she was discovered, no doubt the king would have some measures provided by which she would be protected. If left to her own resources, she

did not fear the snake queen, especially since she seemed to have left her pets behind her.

But a soft, hasty step behind her caused Vashti to turn quickly around. A man came forward hastily, and with outstretched hands. Though clothed in the garb which seemed to be the uniform of the army of the King of the Camels, and though changed somewhat by time, Magdalena had no trouble in recognizing Harry Vernon.

There was no mistaking the ardor with which he advanced toward Vashti. Miss Winter had seen numerous manifestations of it before, and was inclined to think it was the sure enough thing, both then and now.

"You sent for me and I am here," was his exclamation, as he caught Vashti's hands in his, and drew her, not altogether unwillingly, toward him. We have nearly an hour in which we can safely be together, since the king is engaged for that long with some new recruits, who have proved to be refractory. I have much to tell you; and no doubt you could say the same. But, first: have you made any more progress in the search that we know of?"

The woman allowed him to press her hands, and then drew them gently away.

"You speak truly. We have much to tell to each other; I have much to confide to you, if I can only satisfy myself that you are worthy. I know mankind only too well; and it is hard to trust one of the sex. Something whispers to me that I ought not to trust you. Is it so? Are you the soul of truth and honor, and loyal to me only? If you are not, beware! I could give you up, now. It would be a struggle, perhaps; but for your happiness I could do much, and even sacrifice all. But beware how you deceive me. I can be as cruel as the grave, and have power that you dream not of. If there is a thought of disloyalty to me in your mind, take warning; tell me the truth; and go away while yet there is time. It is your last chance."

She spoke in a deadly earnest that the young man could not understand as could the listener behind the curtain. He smiled as he looked in her face, and again tried to draw her toward him.

It was no wonder that he could not believe her. Magdalena herself was almost deceived. This did not look like the Vashti who was the queen of the snakes. The years, or many of them, that had been written on her face had rolled away, and now she looked no older than Zillah. Nothing could take away the look of wisdom that shone there; but it had made no mark, nor stain. She was a girl meeting her lover, as well as a woman who was to raise him to a height that he could never reach alone.

It was the contrast between look and words that now almost startled the young man; though he did not dream how she meant her warning, or that if she once felt hate instead of love how quickly she would slay instead of save. He admired her more than ever at that very moment.

"I can swear to you that if you were to read my inmost heart you would not find the shadow of a disloyalty to you. I place myself unreservedly in your hands to do with what you wish, so that I have the reward of your love. Ask of me what guarantees you wish, and so far as they are in my power to give they are yours. I am a feather to you. Blow on me and I go in whichever direction your breath turns me."

"Perhaps I have read your heart a good deal deeper than you suppose. Shall I test you? Some years ago a girl intrusted to your keeping papers in regard to her birth, that are now of untold value to her. How have you protected your trust?"

Then Harry Vernon was surprised. He stammered, even flushed like a boy—but at the last answered with a truthfulness that could not be mistaken:

"I swear to you that it was through no fault of mine they were lost. I guarded them only too well. They were with me when I wandered away from the train, and the thought of them inspired me to a still fiercer resistance than would the simple hazard of my life, when the red-skins had me corralled in the pass. I fell, at last, and they rifled me of everything, and had me almost stripped of clothing, even. They believed me dead, and were just about scalping me when the king charged in and drove them

away. With them they took the package; but not till I had tried my utmost to redeem my pledge to protect it with my life. Since then I have tried to find some track or trace of it, but in vain. How you know anything of this I cannot guess, but I have told you the true story, even as I frankly told you, once before, that such a woman had existed."

"And you love her no more?"

"Can you ask?"

"I believe you. And now I will answer the question that you have perhaps forgotten."

"She reached out her marble hand until she felt his drop into it. Then she drew him toward her, bending forward as she did so, until her lips almost touched his ear, while she whispered:

"I have found it."

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE SHUTTING OF THE DOOR.

To Magdalena watching, the action of Vashti seemed like a caress. She did not hear the words, and did not understand the true reason for the glow that lit up the face of the young man at the intelligence. However wide she may have been of the truth as regards that, she was none the less right in thinking that her lover was lost to her; and her papers probably gone forever. After that she cared to hear no more, and would have stolen away, somewhat overcome with the knowledge of her defeat, and not caring whether she ever saw Harry Vernon's face again, if she had seen a way to leave the spot unobserved by the two.

She was saved the trouble of making the attempt by their sudden departure. Some unaccountable nervousness possessed Vashti, and she drew Vernon away, preferring to walk with him through the corridors, where there was every chance of their being seen, but where their companionship would not have such a suspicious look. The movement released Magdalena, who, after they had time to get some distance from the spot, sauntered slowly back toward her room, by the route that the king had shown her.

Her return had not so soon been anticipated. As she halted just outside she heard voices within, and stealing a little further forward, on tip toe, she saw that the speaker was the King of the Camels.

Zillah stood before him with the far-away look in her eyes that Magdalena was beginning to recognize so well. The girl was in another of her trance-like conditions, and the king was questioning her.

"You saw it all?" he asked softly, looking at her all the while with a steady gaze, and holding out his hand toward her in a fatherly, protecting sort of way.

"Yes. He struck down the man and then darted away. He went into the darkness and was hidden. They search long for him but cannot find him. They are searching for him yet."

"But follow the man. He must be somewhere. Can you not see him?"

"Y-e-s," answered Zillah, in a hesitating sort of way that was a warning that other influences were at work, though the king did not so understand it.

"Where, then, is he hidden? Look! Tell me, I command you."

"In—in—the—Aztec—treasure—vault," she answered, more slowly than ever, the words being, as it were, wrung from her.

She could not have made a more startling assertion. The king uttered a round oath, that expressed his surprise and anger. With all his labor, backed by the strangest power that mortals ever wielded, he had been unable to penetrate the secret of the vault which he had been so sure was in existence, and here was this man, who had found the route to the retreat to which he was the first and only unguided mortal who had made his way since the secret was lost, had already discovered the crowning mystery of the spot.

"And the vault? Where is it? Speak, and quickly. How is it reached?"

"Vashti knows."

That was the answer that he wrung from her lips; and, with its giving, her powers seemed to fail, and she fell over like one that was dead, and measured her length upon the floor.

"Vashti knows." Then the woman was trilling with him after all. Under the pre-

tense of aiding him in the search with all the powers of witchcraft and clairvoyance—in which he had acknowledged she was his superior—she had been using him simply as her tool. When the time came he could guess what treachery he might expect at her hands. Death without mercy. Without a second glance at the prostrate form on the floor, the king hastened from the room in search of the woman of whose treachery he was now assured. If he met either her or the man who was her lover it would not be well for them.

"A few more such struggles and the girl would die," said Magdalena, pityingly, as she entered the room a moment after the king had left it.

"And yet I must run the risks, since I will thwart him at any cost. Zillah! Do you hear me?"

She softly stroked the forehead of the girl, and looked at her closed eyes with a firm glance, in spite of the pity that was in her tone.

The eyes opened, and strength came back to the girl, who was no longer racked by opposing forces.

"I hear you. What are your orders?"

"Mr. Armstrong! I wish to find him. I am his friend. I must see him. In him lies my only hope of getting away from this wretched place before it is too late."

"I cannot tell you. Find O'Rafferty. It was he who showed them the way. Let me go now, I can stand no more."

Magdalena understood the cry of the tortured spirit, and tried it no further. As quietly as possible she used all the force of her will-power to awaken the girl, and as Zillah had passed from the control of the king before he made his hurried exit, she was successful, though the medium immediately lapsed into the slumber of exhaustion.

"Find O'Rafferty?" mused Magdalena, as she watched the slumbering girl.

"And who is O'Rafferty, and where am I to look for him? It is certainly not the little fellow with Mr. Armstrong. His name is Kane; and I doubt if he knows as much about the Aztec treasure-vault as I do myself. I suppose the only plan will be to wait until I can ask Zillah waking to explain what Zillah sleeping has said."

It was a long time before Zillah, of her own accord, awakened. Magdalena sat by her side and patiently. She reasoned that as long as Mr. Armstrong was in the treasury of the defunct Aztecs, and Vashti kept the secret of its whereabouts herself, there was not much likelihood of any discovery, and she might as well fill in the time resting herself.

It was just as well that she did not go out in search of O'Rafferty, as that gentleman was just then in bad odor with the powers that were. Without being suspected of the full measure of his guilt it was hinted by several that he must have seen something of the prisoners just before they made their disappearance; and about the time Magdalena was receiving the hint from Zillah, the patriotic son of Erin was being placed under arrest by the orders of an officer who had a very black eye. And in the guard-house of the King of the Camels only woman's wit could reach him, or a girl like Magdalena—who had the aid of another like Zillah—obtain from him the secret, the importance of which he did not know.

There was another thing that was in favor of Magdalena, and her efforts. The king was in search of Vashti—and she was nowhere to be found. He kept to himself his anger, and inquired and searched for her high and low, without avail. Vernon frankly admitted that he had an interview with her just after his return, and while he was waiting to be received at court, but she had left him without any indication of what were her intentions. So, in the search for Vashti, other matters were allowed to be overlooked.

Zillah awake was just about as subservient to the will of Magdalena as was Zillah asleep. In addition, she brought her own knowledge and intelligence into play. It was Zillah that brought her to O'Rafferty; it was Zillah that explained the hurried directions he had given when he was convinced that the girl was a friend, and led her into the vault by devious ways that Magdalena could never

have found herself. They passed some of the king's retainers, but a word from Zillah was all that was necessary to disarm their suspicions, if they had any.

Once before Magdalena had passed over much of the ground, but then she was blindfolded. In the labyrinth that existed under the palace the ways were both dangerous and difficult, but at last the two found themselves at what they believed was the spot described by O'Rafferty, and fortunately they were alone.

"Push on the corner of the stone, he said," muttered Magdalena, as she applied all her strength to the spot indicated. O'Rafferty had taken particular pains to locate the spot lest he might forget it, and so had been able to give such an exact description that there was not much trouble in finding it when they once got in the neighborhood.

The stone yielded; the aperture was before them.

"And he said that I should be careful to wedge the rock that it could not altogether close behind me, as he knew no way of opening it from within. That is done—what will we find?"

They saw from the shoulder on the rock why it was that there was no way of opening the stone door from the inner side; and though they allow it to swing to as far as was safe, in order to avoid detection by any casual passer, they wedged it so that it could still be pushed back again when he time came. Then they entered, and looked around.

They were in a vault—a small, circular room, which seemed to be empty save for a something in its center which showed white and gleaming under the feeble rays of their lantern. They approached it, and found that it was a skeleton.

They were not alarmed. Something of the kind they had half-expected to see. They simply stepped to one side, and examined the walls more closely.

They saw that there were several arched openings; and through one of these they passed. Then, in truth, they knew that they were within the hidden treasury, and that around them was wealth untold.

There were no signs of Armstrong and his companion, but they might be hidden in one of the rooms that stretched away, beyond. Magdalena thought of calling to him, but the unutterable loneliness of the place prevented her. She held the lantern she carried over her head and peered around. As she did so she heard the stone door go shut with a heavy thud; and the maddening thought flashed across her that they too were entombed alive, unless—slender chance—O'Rafferty came to their release.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

"STRIKE, DIAMOND, STRIKE!"

It was more of a relief than a fright when they heard a light step in the outer room, that came straight toward them. The owner of it could not be very formidable.

It came on nearer. A female figure glided through the arch, and stood before them. Zillah shrunk back into the darkness, but Magdalena faced the intruder without a thought of fear. At the first glance she had recognized Vashti.

And Vashti was just as prompt to recognize her. Nothing could have been more unexpected than this meeting, yet she did not hesitate or show the least surprise. It was anger only that flashed into her face; and the flush of a revenge that was soon to be gratified.

"Ah!" she hissed, slowly drawing nearer and nearer. The youth had gone out of her face, and most of the beauty that Magdalena had seen there but a short time before.

"You have delivered yourself into my hands. There is nothing on earth that can save you now. If there was not enough else to strike you for, you must find the secret of this place, that was guarded alike by the curse and the power of the dead and the living. Were you another I would shut you up among the millions that you have found, and let that be your punishment. I could come daily and gloat over the waning life; and tear your limbs apart when the last spark had fled. But with you I dare not risk it. Some chance would befriend you; some wave of fate waft you out into the

world again, more beautiful, and more lucky than ever. You must die—and now!"

Foot facing foot; eye looking into eye, the two stood. In the presence of the threatened death, Magdalena was as cool as the coolest. She held the lantern above her head, so that its rays illuminated the face of both, and stared at the threatener in cold and haughty defiance. Well enough she knew that the threat was no idle one; that Vashti would not have spoken before she was ready to strike; and that it was beyond her power to ward the stroke.

"What! No answer, girl? Are you dumb with fear when you find at last that Vashti has you to herself, to work on you her own sweet will? Speak! Do you not even want time to plead for your life? See! Diamond is waiting. He loves to carry death and destruction under his tongue, because he knows that some day Vashti will call on him to use them. Move at your peril. A quiver of your hand, a frown even, and he darts. It must come at last, but if you are wise you may prolong your life a few wretched moments while I tell you why I would do you to death without the mercy that I would show to a dog. Show your fangs, Diamond, and let her know that my words are no empty boast."

Vashti had held her hand out toward the girl, and while she was speaking the snake ran hissing up her arm, winding spirally about it until it threw a coil around the white wrist that felt the pressure without a tremor. Then it threw back its head, opened wide its jaws, and was ready, at the signal, to strike.

"I fear neither you nor your serpent," retorted Magdalena, proudly.

"When my time has come, no effort nor action of mine can save me—nor shorten my span of life by the fraction of a minute. If you think that you can bring me to your feet, or make me sue for mercy, you are widely off the mark. I understand your hate. While I live you can never be sure of my cast-off lover. If he knew you as you are, old, vile, and the wife of another man, he would turn from you in horror. All the magic of which you can boast would not throw the flimsiest veil of glamour over his eyes. He would die sooner than consort with the Queen of the Snakes, even with the millions of the Aztec treasure vault at her command. Slay me—and afterward vengeance will rest with the king. Never fear but what he will take it."

"You have only sealed the death-warrant that was already signed. There is nothing more for you to say—if there is I refuse to hear it. Die, now! Strike Diamond, strike!"

The wrist around which Diamond hung coiled moved slightly, and at the signal the serpent's head darted back for the blow. He was not two feet from Magdalena's face, and the motion meant death.

Then—

There was a sharp, spiteful crack, and a spot of Diamond's blood on Vashti's face, while Gentle Jack was stepping into the vault from beneath the second arch, a smoking revolver in his hand.

Vashti dropped the writhing body and turned to face the intruder. Diamond was the only one of her pets she had taken with her when she went to the interview with Harry Vernon, and she had no other weapon.

"A fair shot considering the light," laughed Jack, "though, if the lantern hadn't been steady as a rock, and just where it was, I guess I couldn't have hit it at all. What's going on here, anyhow?"

"Only the rehearsal for a little tragedy that will never be mounted on the boards, after all. Do not harm her; she is Zillah's mother."

"And who in Diana's name is Zillah?" queried Jack, his ear toward Magdalena, but his eyes on Vashti.

"She was my guide here, under O'Rafferty's direction, and came to warn you, and rescue you. Sooner or later you must fall into the hands of the king if you remain within the precincts of his dwelling. He is searching for you everywhere; and he even knows that you are in the treasure vault. You must be ready to leave this to-night. It is possible that you may be able to creep out unseen, and find some way to escape across the desert, or along the path by which you came.

If you choose, you can come back at your leisure; but for the present nothing more can be done here."

"It's gims an' jewils that yer mouth is dhrappin' now," interposed Barney, who came at Mr. Armstrong's back. "An' it would be no baid oydea to declare the firsh dividind on the capithal invistid, an' retoire to place it in a safer place. Is it a bank that we're in; or a siction av a mint? Do we take all we can, an' kape all we git?"

"Your fingers are free, and we are entitled to as much of the spoils as we can carry away on the first visit. When we turn the whole thing over to a stock company, to work the remainder on shares, will be time enough to figure down close on exact proportions. And now—what is the matter with you?"

Vashti had been strangely silent, ever since the shot, and the appearance of Jack. It is true, Mr. Armstrong had not allowed his gaze to wander from her face, and there never was a time when she was not practically under the muzzle of his revolver; but it was strange that her tongue was tied, and that she stood there with face growing whiter every instant. The pallor of her countenance before had been marked, but now it was ghastly. At Jack's question she seemed to shrivel all up, and in a nerveless heap she sunk noiselessly to the floor.

She was whispering something, and Jack leaned over to listen.

"Your bullet did the business. There is no remedy; and I do not know that I care to live, anyway. The head of Diamond was flung back upon my face, and his fangs dipped deeply. I am dying, that is all."

"Good glory, woman! I didn't want to kill you. Can nothing be done? Here! Try the contents of this flask. It is the Western Slope brand, warranted to cure, or kill. Of course I need every drop, but I cannot see a woman die before my eyes. Come! Open your lips, and let it reach the spot where it will do the most good."

"Useless. Diamond reached a vein, and his poison was very strong. It will not take me long to die. I feel the deadly poison in my veins, and the end is coming fast. Now, stand back, and tell that girl to come to my side. I have a last word to say to her."

"Excuse me, my friend, but I think I would rather not," answered Jack, warned by a certain glitter in her eye. "There are whispers that kill, and some words are deadly. Breathe your confidences to me, and I will see that they are placed only where they will do the most good. I think you mean her harm."

With a sharp, hissing sound, like the snakes that she had fondled, Vashti gave a spring. Her hand was held for Magdalena's throat, and if Armstrong had not been quick and cool she would have reached it. He threw up his hand, and by a quick, powerful motion flung her back to fall into the arms of Zillah, who staggered feebly out from the shadows where she had been hiding.

For only an instant did the snake queen rest there. Feebly she wrenched herself loose from the none too closely clinging hands.

"Back, spawn of the viper! You are of my blood, but I will have none of you. My curse be with you all! Too late!"

She dropped back, writhed convulsively, so that Jack began to suspect that a more potent poison than even that from Diamond's fangs was at work.

And then she was still.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

GENTLE JACK TO THE RESCUE.

"WHERE is Vashti?"

The King of the Camels had found Vernon, at least, and darted the question at him without preliminary greeting.

"I do not know. I saw her for a few moments, while I was waiting to give in my report. We walked through the halls together, and she left me without explanation of what she was going to do."

"Wait for me here, then. If I find her not I may have something of interest to you. That is, if you are trustworthy. You are, are you not?"

"To the death," answered Vernon, fervently.

"Ah, to the death, yes. I saved your life

once, and have trusted you greatly, but that would hardly give me so strong a claim on you. Well, to the death. Yes! Wait till I return."

Somewhat disconnectedly the king muttered these words, and then hurried away. There was a chance that Vashti had found Magdalena, but he was more willing to believe that she had gone to interview Aztec Alf. If the two were together, it would be strange if he could not wring from one or the other the secret of the mysteriously guarded treasure-vault. And he would have visited the man with the tiger that morning, anyhow, if other things had not gone so contrariwise that, as yet, he had found no time.

Better it might have been if he had made the visit at once; but there was some time lost in giving directions for the search, and for the stationing of guards so that, as he believed, John Armstrong could not escape from the vaults. Vashti was already face to face with Jack Armstrong, when he stepped lightly into the dungeon of the Aztec, and drew a massive door shut behind him.

"Your secret is a secret no longer," was his salutation, as Alf looked moodily up, without a trace of anger in his face.

"I have come to give you one more chance to forestall the discovery that I am bound sooner or later to make. If you choose you can still make terms, since I find it hard to wait. Vashti and her lover know the secret of the vault. The woman is there now, and with her is the man in whose company you camped a few nights ago—the fellow by the name of Armstrong. You can judge whether it is worth your while to be silent longer."

"What is that to me? It is not that it is worth my while to keep silent, but because of my word. They may have found it, as you say; but it was by accident or search, and not by the magic that you have tried. Against that it is guarded by spells more potent than any you or Vashti can weave. Watch for them, follow them, discover the spot if you can. I care not whether you find it or not. Something tells me that Vashti will make no profit of the secret."

"Ay, and I could tell you so, if no one else did. The woman has been false to me from start to finish; and the man has been falsier still. Think whether I will let them live with the secret, even though they offered, when too late, to share it with me? Rather let them and the treasure be lost forever in a general explosion; and I go out into the world with the millions I have already filched from mine, and palace, temple, or whatever you may choose to call this old pile, that looks as though it and its treasures might have stood here since the world first began. Be on my side or theirs. Share my fate or theirs. Choose—and quickly. Time for hesitation is wanting."

"Man, man! what is there to choose? Do your worst—and fail. My time has not come yet, but when it does you will find how vain were your threats and promises. I can afford to wait."

"But I cannot. One more offer. Find Vashti for me, and bring her to me. You shall have the untrammelled and unwatched right to go where you will, within these passages, whether to mine or dungeons. She is within the treasure vault—that much Zillah could tell me, though, when I commanded her to tell me where to find it, the veil, that from the first has been between her and it, was there still. Keep your secret, drag her out. If you demand it, I will swear that she shall have neither time nor choice in the matter of revealing what she has found. I will slay her on sight."

Outwardly the king seemed to keep his temper well, so far as Alf was concerned. If his words and actions did not belie him, all his fury and hate were reserved for the woman and her lover, who had deceived him. Whether Desert Alf saw deeper into the heart of the man or no, he gave no sign of being moved by the appeal. He shook his head quietly.

"Why weary me thus? I came here to find my daughter, and have succeeded. When the time comes she will find her way to me, and meantime, I am willing to let fate fight my battles. I have been drifted hither; and it will be no stranger if I am drifted away again. If not, it is because my hour has come for death, and I cannot avoid it. Leave me."

"Fool and knave! You have been offered more than you had a right to hope for, or expect. Now, your last chance has passed, and there is nothing left for you but death. By the everlasting! I make a cleaning up this day of all these intruders, who would rob me of the secret that shall be mine alone. And with you will I begin."

His pent up wrath burst forth. His eyes flashed with baffled fury; and he looked down upon Alf as though he was about to spring.

The prisoner looked up coldly. He raised his wrists.

"If I was not fettered perhaps you would be more sparing of your threats; at least, until you had a guard to hold me covered while you spoke."

"I would be more fool than you if I did anything else. What are a dozen such lives as yours to one like mine? I will hold the secrets of the earth at my command. One day I may even grasp the vial of eternal youth. Why should I risk losing all without profit or reason? You have looked your last on light and life. Farewell to them both for you."

In that cold, concentrated tone, there was no spark of pity. When his hand raised it was because he meant to slay.

And this time Draco sprang.

From the corner darted a ball of yellow and black, with the sound of a snapping chain as it came. Then the man was down, with Draco standing over him, her teeth on his throat and her eyes on her master, as she tore at the king with her talons.

For the first time Alf showed some excitement. Not angrily, but in a sharp tone of command, he spoke.

"Hold, Draco! Come here!"

The cougar, though she had tasted blood, arose, with a low whine, and came to the side of her master. She waved her tail gently, and looked from him to the prostrate man. He had been under her jaws and paws but a moment, yet he lay as motionless as a corpse. If not dead, his every faculty was benumbed, and the blood was running from the wounds that the cat had made.

"Leave him alone, Draco. His hour has almost come, but he is not to die under your fangs, or my hands. It will be safer not to meddle with him. He might work us some harm yet."

The cougar looked as though she was willing to run the chances; but did not offer to move from under the hand which Alf placed on her head, though she pricked up her ears at the sound of running feet outside of the cell. When the door opened, and a man stood on the threshold, she showed no sign of anger.

"Here you are, old man!"

It was Gentle Jack who spoke, and he held a lantern in one hand, a revolver in the other.

"The girls are just outside, and the sooner we evacuate the better. There has been a lively old time down among the tombs, and I am on the march with an army of the helots at my back. Whether they will run if we meet the King of the Camels, and he cracks his whip, I can't make affidavit; but you can swear to it that I won't until I am sure there is no good in lively shooting. Numerically the sides will be more than even; but Gentle Jack counts for a thousand when he is playing the high roller, and ready to go for keeps. Hillo! what have we here?"

He had been working at the manacles that held the man of the cougar, and so had not seen the crumpled little heap that lay but a few yards away.

"The king, by all that is holy! And dead as a door nail. Looks as if he had been under treatment, and Draco had been using the trepan. He trusted to his witchery a—too often. Let him lie! There is no use for funerals. If we ever get back I can guarantee a burial according to the regular programme; but just now we are in too much of a hurry to spare the time. Faith! if they knew that the old man was dead I am not sure that my recruits would not rise in mutiny, and start a kingdom of their own. I sha'n't feel safe until I get them out on the desert. There! Off go your bracelets, and you are a free man. Put your best foot foremost till we can join the crowd."

Gentle Jack made but scant examination,

and came to his conclusions with a jump. He saw that the man was out of the way of doing any present harm, and that was enough for him.

Desert Alf felt much the same way. When he was released he had no desire to linger longer there, but wished to join his daughter at once, uncertain though he was as to how she would receive him. The two passed out hurriedly, followed by the cat after she had cast a wistful glance at her motionless foe.

Shortly after they were gone the King of the Camels opened his eyes, pressed his hand to the wounds from which the blood still trickled, rose unsteadily to his feet, and glared around him.

"Alone, and hard hit!" he muttered thickly. "The cursed, treacherous beast. Why had I not the wit to fix her with my eye? But, I swear I will not die—yet. If I can but—I will—hold together long enough to crawl to my kennel I ask no more odds of fate. I will crush them all—all! The King of the Camels will not die alone."

Tottering, he stumbled toward the door.

CHAPTER XXXV.

REQUIESCAT IN PACE.

GENTLE JACK in the few words of explanation to Desert Alf probably told all that the reader wants to know as to what happened immediately after leaving the treasure vault. With the secret of the hidden treasure discovered, and Magdalena anxious to leave, the mission of the high roller seemed to lack but one thing for its accomplishment—and that was to get away safely, and at once. He thought it was about time to take desperate chances, and set to work accordingly.

Since the guard had scattered in pursuit of the man they had escorted to the mines, there was but a small force left to manage the slaves at work. If the latter had not had all the manhood worried out of them, and could be set free and armed, there would be force enough to sweep through the mines, and perhaps give the rest of the army of the king a very lively bit of entertainment in case they tried to bar the march for freedom. When the few guards were least expecting it, Gentle Jack and his Irishman boldly stepped forward, and ordered hands up in a tone that showed they did not mean to be trifled with.

There was no fight, for, with the drop on them, even the officer with the black eye was willing to listen to reason, and elevate his digits. After that the work was too easy for anything but play, until Jack had Aztec Alf rescued, and the whole cavalcade on the march.

The king did not give the little sport credit for the genius which he really possessed. Armstrong had managed men in his time, and been in more than one little war. He knew the advantage of keeping things moving at a rapid rate when they were once started, and he knew also how to crowd his men, tranquilize his feminines, and get out of the darkness into the open light of day after the most expeditious fashion possible.

In the hurry, Mr. O'Rafferty would have most likely been forgotten had it not been for Barney.

"Sure, an' it's a broth av a b'ye he is, an' not another shtip do Oi move till Oi foinde out what's the matter wid him. Does onnybody know where to look for him?"

The terrible death of Vashti had of course moved her daughter deeply, but the meeting with her father had changed the currents of her thoughts somewhat, and when Magdalena repeated Barney's question to her she led the way to Mr. O'Rafferty without hesitation. Fortunately he was not far off, and when he was found, and the man at his door made prisoner, he had a little suggestion to make.

"Av it's ours the ranch is by conquest, phat's the matther wid me takin' a glimpse av the owld man's private thirsury? It's on the way to fraydom, an' it's the ownly chance for Michael O'Rafferty to share in the shpoiles. There's jims there, an' jewils, as Oi saw meself; an' av the spalpeen has ownly lift the key in the lock Oi won't begrudge ye all the rist av the luck."

"It's at your own risk, Michael," answered Jack. "We have done the square thing by you already, and you can't expect us to be

throwing away our chances. We are in a heap of danger, and don't you forget it. As near as I can figure it up there are twenty men, at least, in the army of the king, that are not yet accounted for, and there are just about camels enough for the transportation of our own party. If we get them in a bunch we have a fighting chance, and more. If we have to gather the Bactrians up singly, and have a fight over each one, somebody on our side will be apt to get hurt. Away with you; and join us outside, if you can."

O'Rafferty could and did join them. He had a casket tucked under his arm, and was flourishing a revolver.

"Whoop, whillylool!" he shouted, as he came in sight. "It's the box av diamonds that Oi sthruck the fourst clatther. Whin it's opined it's a forthune you'll say before yez. This way for the camils!"

On the plain all was quiet when the little party burst out of the palace and turned their faces in the direction of the spot where the camels were lying. A few of the Orientally dressed men were in sight, but the majority of the "army" were hidden in the shade of the buildings that served as their barracks. Before any resistance or opposition could be organized Jack Armstrong was in possession of the animals, and was hastily laying his plans for immediate flight. Fortunately there was a store-house near by where the equipment could be made after the regular fashion of those who were starting on the outward journey.

"You understand," said Jack, speaking at large, but reaching the ears of Barney and the man with the cougar more particularly. "Of course we could scoop in the outfit here, but what would we do with them? We could not take them along with us, and we wouldn't murder them in cold blood. The only thing to do is to leave them behind, and if we ever get back it will be with force enough to provide for them. All set, and here we go!"

"An' here they come!" exclaimed Barney, as quite a little mob of excited men burst into sight, driving straight toward them, with weapons in their hands, and evidently with no very good intentions.

"But, good heavens! What is that?"

Behind the mob there was a dull, muffled roar, as of a dozen thunders; then came a cloud of dust, and a dissolving view of the ancient temple, which was slowly settling to the ground.

Armstrong was the least astonished of all. He watched the scene calmly, and then turned to the rest.

"The old wolf wasn't as dead as we thought for; but he must have been pretty hard hurt to throw up his cards after that fashion. He knew where the keystone was, to the pile, and when he found there was no hope, blew the whole thing to never come back again. He's there, under the whole of it; I wish I knew how many more he took along with him out of the dew."

The King of the Camels was there; Harry Vernon was there; but how many more shared their fate has not yet been brought to light.

"An' now's the toime to be sittin' out, while they're all paraloized," suggested O'Rafferty.

"Not a doubt ye know nothin' at all about camel-dhrivin', but it's a poor fool that necessity won't t'ache, an' Oi am the chafe av the shtables, an' kin l'arn ye the thrick av it in no toime at all, at all."

O'Rafferty had made himself particularly useful already, and now he took matters in his own hands. The loading of the camels was completed, the course hastily taken, and the march begun.

What became of the scattered subjects of the King of the Camels is not known. They had their means of subsistence, and it was possible for them to find their way back to the world along the route by the sunken river, if there was any way around the rapids. The most of them were men who became subjects of the pocket kingdom because they could live nowhere else, and as all of them were aware of the mines under the palace, from which the king had been drawing the revenue to support them, it may be that they will remain there until starved out, and strive to find a way to the tunnels which the old man closed so effectually before he left.

Jack has not been troubled greatly over the thought that the treasures might be found before he could take another trip to the kingdom in the desert. He was so busy with the affairs of Miss Winter as to take little thought of anything else. And though Michael O'Rafferty came in for a share of the spoils that he had taken from the box of jewels in the vault, he had quite enough to last him a long time: so did not care to start out in search of another adventure.

The liberality to Michael was not without a reason. When the casket, snatched up in the throne-room, was opened, its contents were found to be of no particular value save to the owner, as they consisted altogether of papers and a picture. When Jack looked over them he found that they were the missing ones belonging to Miss Magdalena. The king had held them in his possession, after all, having removed them from Harry Vernon's body before that young man returned to consciousness. No doubt he had placed them in the casket, intending to use them to further his suit with their true owner. At any rate they passed into Magdalena's hands, and, backed as she was by wealth, John Armstrong, and the records, she had no more occasion to fear Pet Parker, or the men who had hounded him on. No wedding has yet been announced, but the probabilities are large for one in the not very distant future. Armstrong said his say on the back of a camel, and Magdalena asked to reserve her answer until she was certain that she was more than a nameless waif. When she has secured the million left by John Winter, to her actual possession, she will probably say yes.

Desert Alf and his daughter said good-by along the road, and quietly dropped out of sight, shortly after emerging from the desert. Neither seemed to mourn much over the death of Vashti, and it is to be hoped that they went to find happiness in the future. They took their cat with them.

Barney is still with Mr. Armstrong, of course. He and Michael have had numerous discussions over plans for the regeneration of "Owld Oireland," but as yet the expedition has not set sail, and the green flag is not at the fore. When the time comes there is no doubt but that the two will be found close behind it.

What will be the final upshot of that strange pilgrimage, all is only a matter of conjecture. In the hurried glance through the vaults it was not likely that the full measure of the hidden treasure was taken in; but there seemed to be enough in sight to make it a matter worth while to share it on a certainty. When the expedition has been made, and the whole treasure secured, the amount may turn out to be almost fabulous. On the other hand, it may turn out that it is lost forever, or that, if found, it may prove that, in the hasty scramble before the flight, the cream of the collection, in the shape of the jewels which they pocketed, had been skimmed by Armstrong and his friends. Any way, the now gentlest of Gentle Jacks never will regret his pilgrimage to the desert.

THE END.

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